



THE JESSE JAMES STORIES

ORIGINAL NARRATIVES OF THE JAMES BOYS

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 19.

Price, Five Cents.

JESSE JAMES AT BAY

OR
THE TRAIN ROBBERS' TRAIL



BY
W.B. LAWSON

"STOP THAT, MY FRIEND, AND HAND OVER THAT MESSAGE TO ME!" SAID THE STERN VOICE OF JESSE JAMES.



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By W. B. LAWSON.

CHAPTER I.

THE MAN WHO STOOD BETWEEN.

"Mad dog! mad dog!"

This terrible cry sounded through a small village in the mountainous region of Missouri one sultry afternoon.

It sent an electric thrill through many a woman's heart, for children played upon the street, unconscious of their deadly peril.

As it happened, the men were away; hardly one seemed to be in sight.

Down the street came the savage beast, snapping right and left, in the manner peculiar to animals in his terrible condition.

The brute presented a sight that would fill one with awe. The foam dribbled from his gaunt jaws and lathered his chest. There was something in his appearance that must have caused the strongest man to shiver.

Playing in the street was a group of children.

They saw the dog, but, with that peculiar trust that

children exhibit, saw nothing in his appearance to excite alarm.

Many a time they may have played with this same animal.

When the wild cries reached their ears they looked around to see the cause.

The dog advanced directly upon them.

Nothing could make him diverge from the straight line upon which he moved.

In a dozen seconds or more the mad beast would be in the midst of the innocents, biting them right and left.

The situation was so strained that more than one poor mother lost her voice, and, unable to shriek longer, clasped her hands, while her lips moved in silent prayers.

They were heard.

An answer came.

On the sidewalk stood a man who was carrying a small bag. He seemed dusty and travel-stained, and had the appearance of a peddler, for such gentry sometimes found

their way to the village, and drove bargains with the people of the neighborhood.

The peddler had not noticed the clamor at first, but, when the significant words of "mad dog" reached his ears, he looked around.

There was the gaunt, ferocious beast bearing down upon the group of children.

It was like an eagle swooping on a flock of ducks in the open water.

It was fortunate, indeed, that the peddler chanced to be armed.

Perhaps it was even more fortunate that he proved to be a man of decision.

The situation was so critical that any hesitation meant a terrible fate for the children, who must immediately fall beneath the teeth of the ravenous beast.

Like a flash the peddler dropped his pack.

He ran out into the street.

As he sprang, his hand seemed to seek some pocket, for it instantly grasped a revolver.

The shuddering women still held their breath and mentally prayed, but a sense of relief had swept over them when they saw the figure of a man between the mad animal and their beloved children.

No sooner did the peddler reach his position than he dropped on one knee.

His intention was to be more on a level with the advancing brute.

Brief though this time had been, it brought the mad dog close upon him.

The terror seemed to recognize the fact that his right of way was barred, for his aspect became even more ferocious as he swept down upon the crouching figure.

Perhaps the revolver might miss fire—such things had happened before.

This would leave the peddler in a bad situation, as he must sacrifice his own life in order to save the children.

He was made of true stuff, and did not flinch.

The hand that held out the revolver was as steady as a rock.

Already his intended victim was within ten feet of him.

This was reduced to six.

Fire, brave man, or you are lost! This was the thought that passed through many an anxious mind, as the shuddering spectators watched the scene transpiring before their eyes.

Ah! there was a throb—a puff of smoke.

He had fired.

The brute rolled over in a little cloud of dust, kicked spasmodically, struggled to his feet, advanced toward his enemy, snapping like a demon, received a second shot, and this time fell in a shuddering heap at the very feet of the man who had slain him.

Wild cries arose.

They were no longer filled with terror, but shouts of thanksgiving rang through the relieved villagers.

As for the peddler, giving the still quivering body of the fallen brute a contemptuous kick with his foot, he concealed the weapon with which he had done the brave deed, turned on his heel, and walked over to where he had left his small pack.

This he picked up, tossed over his back, and resumed his walk along the village street, as though nothing unusual had happened.

Around the fallen dog many women gathered, to view his terrible shape.

"Where is he?" the cry arose.

They had been so much engrossed with the dog, and in hugging the now frightened young ones, that no person seemed to have paid any attention to the stranger.

Up and down the street they looked, but he was not in sight.

Truth to tell, the peddler had quietly entered the village tavern near by.

Evening was near at hand.

The day had been exceedingly hot, and a summer storm, so common in this region, was pushing up from the west.

Already the thunder grumbled in the distance, and the bank of dark clouds hurried on.

Lightning played hither and yon, as the air was charged with electricity.

The peddler sat upon the porch in front of the tavern to see the storm.

The first spatter of large raindrops alarmed the women and sent them scurrying in all directions, but the story of that day's doings would be carried far and near.

After the first little rush of rain there was a short lull.

It was only the hush that generally precedes the rush of the tempest.

A clattering of hoofs down the village street herald the coming of horsemen, and presently they burst into view, looming up like phantom riders in the gloom that was quickly being spread over the scene by the onward rush of the black storm clouds.

There were three of them.

All were mounted on fine horses—regular Kentucky thoroughbreds—and sat in their saddles with the ease of veterans.

The storm was now howling down through the valley, and, with the wind, a commotion was created in the village.

Signs creaked and swung wildly, doors banged, clouds of dust swept along the street, and then came the rain.

In three minutes the water descended in sheets, electric flashes cut the darkness in twain, as the bolts descended,

and the very earth quaked under the tumultuous throbbing of the thunder.

It was a wild scene.

Secure from the descending rain under the roof of the porch the peddler watched the scene.

He saw the three horsemen dash up in the first rush of rain, spring from their saddles, give their steeds to several darkies who ran out to receive them, and scurry under the shelter of the porch.

"Narrow escape, boys," laughed the tall man, who wore a slouch hat over his eyes.

"You bet. I'm always ready to escape a ducking. Seems to me I'd rather face a revolver in the hand of a sheriff than——"

"Hist!"

The tall man gave this warning, and accompanied with it a glance in the direction of the peddler, who sat there apparently taking no stock in anything but the storm, but who must have heard all that was said.

The three stood in the porch for a few minutes watching the tempest whirl down the street.

"A screecher, eh, Jesse?" remarked one.

"Rather, Dick."

Turning on his heel, the tall man passed on through the door, and entered the house, where lights had already sprung up.

The peddler remained.

Although watching the summer storm in its passage through the village, his thoughts appeared to be in another quarter, for he was muttering to himself:

"It's him, sure enough. Fortune is playing the game into my hand."

Presently he, too, seemed to have had enough of the storm.

Perhaps it was the odor of beefsteak and fried onions that drew him in, for supper was being prepared, and the inner man could not detect these symptoms unmoved.

The interior of the tavern did not differ in any material manner the wide world over.

There was a taproom, and adjoining it a drawing-room, small, but serving the purpose of the family and what guests they might happen to have.

In this region only belated travelers were apt to stop over.

Four at a time was an unusual event, and mine host showed some little excitement over the prospect ahead.

When the peddler entered the taproom the landlord was engaged in conversation with the tallest of the three horsemen.

The other two were chatting socially over their drinks with several loungers, for a tavern in a Missouri village is always a rendezvous for the odd characters of the place.

"Who's that chap, Mac?" asked the traveler, addressing the landlord.

"Don't know—peddler, I reckon, for thar's his pack over yonder. He is an interesting character in my eyes, though, Jesse."

"How's that?"

"My woman just told me—she was out on the street, and seen the whole business. That man will be remembered in the prayers of many a mother this night."

"Why so, Mac?"

"Thar was a big, mad dog down the street just before the storm came up, a rushin' on a lot of children.

"The critter would have torn 'em right an' left only for this man. He jumped atween an' let the critter have it dead certain.

"My woman says the dog fell at his feet, and when they got over huggin' the children and turned to look for the peddler, he was gone."

The man in the slouch hat eyed the party under discussion again with a more decided interest than he had yet shown.

"Jove! he don't look it, and yet thar's something about his sleepy eye that makes a man feel uneasy. I've an idea he's a devil when aroused."

"You're just square on that, old hoss."

"He used a pistol?"

"Yes."

"Peddlers don't generally go armed, or, if they do, you don't see 'em risk their lives before a mad dog. Mac, I've an idea."

"What is it, Jesse?"

"This chap's one of 'em; you know they hunt for me in all disguises. Why not as a peddler?"

"Anyhow," muttered the landlord, "he's a brave man."

CHAPTER II.

PEDDLER OR WHAT?

The traveler caught his words.

"A brave man! I don't doubt it, Mac. None but such dare prowl about these mountains seeking to capture Jesse James. A brave man! Well, what you've told me convinces me of that, and at the same time gives me a strong idea that my guess is a right one."

The landlord moved uneasily.

"What will you do about it?"

"Nothing until I prove it."

"How can you do that?"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Some one must examine his pack."

"I suppose so."

"That may tell the tale, Mac. Hello, there's the bell for supper. Let's adjourn."

There was a like movement from the others, and presently they sat at the table.

Mac presided, and his good wife poured the tea.

She pressed everything on the peddler, and seemed to confuse him a trifle. Having seen the way in which this man stood between the innocents and the mad dog, she felt as though there was nothing too good for him.

Jesse James sat opposite the peddler.

Although pretending not to pay any particular attention to him, he watched the man.

His knowledge of human nature was wonderful, and had been acquired by means of the rough life he had led since boyhood.

Plainly, in his eyes, the man was no fool.

He seemed reserved, and only spoke when addressed, but there was a power back of all this that impressed the other.

A man who has been hunted for years with a price set upon his head is apt to be suspicious.

The meal was nearly finished.

Outside the elements had calmed down as suddenly as they had arisen; the storm was over, it seemed.

Lights flashed through the village.

Lanterns passed the windows.

A number of people entered the taproom, and their voices could be plainly heard.

"Where is he?"

"We want to see him."

"Hello, Mac! Where's the man?"

Jesse James half started from his chair, and a hand involuntarily crept to his pocket.

It seemed to strike him that this was meant for him—perhaps a surprise party.

Through the doorway came a string of people—men, women and children.

This did not look like a posse sent to effect his capture or death; besides, they seemed to pay no attention to him.

"There he is!" they cried.

A rush was made for the peddler.

He endeavored to escape, but a band of women blocked the way of retreat.

"Mister Peddler," said one man, who may have assumed the office of spokesman, or been appointed such, "we've come to thank ye for saving our children. Thar ain't a woman in town as don't want to show her gratitude and they'll buy ye out to-morrow, to prove it. Now, we want to thank you, and shake the hand of a brave man."

The peddler saw he was caught.

There was no escape, and, assuming the air of a martyr, he held out his hand.

Like a flash, Jesse James eyed that palm.

Then, bending his head, he smiled.

"A peddler, and used to rough times, with such a palm as that! Well, I don't believe it," he muttered.

The reception was soon through with, when the good souls retired as they came, leaving their men to sit about in the taproom; but, during the entire evening, it was the thing for several women to steal up to the door of the tavern and look in upon the peddler.

He was an odd-looking genius, too, and wore a pair of spectacles.

Seldom speaking, they could hardly tell what his nationality was, but he had a German or Bohemian cast.

A dozen men or more sat about the taproom, or stood in groups.

Reminiscences were indulged in.

Most of them seemed to know Jesse James and his two companions, and greeted them in a neighborly way.

The notorious outlaw of Missouri never had any fear of being betrayed by such people, for he did them no injury.

He was no common thief, robbing indiscriminately right and left.

Those who suffered at his hands were railroads, express companies, and banks.

True, in order to accomplish his work with these corporations, he was often obliged to murder some trusted employee of the company, but that was a mere incident in the whole.

These men were his friends for a variety of reasons; although not ready to take his part, they never tried to betray him. First, fear made them such, for the desperado had a way of exciting this feeling in the breasts of those with whom he came in contact.

Then, again, they were in sympathy with him, for he made war on Northern capital, and they were almost to a man ex-Confederates.

The peddler soon tired of the scene.

He went off with Mac and was shown to a room in the second story.

Gradually the villagers departed to their homes, and things began to settle back to what they might ordinarily be.

"Now is the time, Mac," said Jesse James.

"You're anxious about that pack."

"I confess it, man."

He bent over the peddler's small bundle—that is, small for one of his business, though, considered in any other light, it was of quite a respectable size.

This he unstrapped.

His companions and the landlord watched him in silence, and yet with some interest.

The pack came open.

There was disclosed to view a small variety of wares

such as a shrewd peddler in these parts might readily expect a sale for.

Jesse James was evidently surprised, and perhaps a little disappointed.

He had expected to fasten upon something that would betray the other.

Now he hardly knew what to think.

"Perhaps I can help you to select," said a quiet voice just behind him.

Turning his head, he saw the peddler standing in the doorway leading to the stairs.

For once in his life Jesse James felt cheap; but he was at least partially equal to the emergency.

"Stranger, you must pardon me, but I used to be in your business myself, and I thought here was a good chance for a trade. I wanted to make a lump offer for the whole pack, and then sell the things to the people here. They'd have paid a good price for anything that came from you."

It was rather an ingenious explanation, and the peddler appeared to accept it.

"Say no more, stranger. I reckon I might as well have that profit as you. With your permission I'll close the pack."

This he proceeded to do, shouldering it as if his object in coming downstairs had been to bring his stock in trade up to his room.

"Good-night, gentlemen."

Saying which the peddler withdrew.

"Well," spoke up the landlord, when the four were alone again, "are you satisfied?"

"Yes."

"He's what he seems."

The other looked keenly at him.

"Mac, my suspicions are confirmed—that is what I am satisfied about."

"The deuce you say; then our peddler——"

"Is a man-hunter on the track."

The landlord whistled.

Both the other men frowned.

"Why, I thought from his pack he was all right."

"Well, yes, it was selected with some judgment, I admit; but sometimes a little thing gives a man away."

"What did you see, Jesse?"

"When he bent forward I got a chance to make a discovery. Ordinary peddlers don't go about the country wearing a wig, do they?"

"I reckon not."

"Well, this man's got one on. So you see he has some reason for concealment."

"Perhaps he's laid out some man and has to keep shady," proposed the man called Dick.

"I choose to believe another thing. We'll see more of that man before we've done this job."

His words seemed to make his companions a little uneasy.

"We'd best skip when the rest of the boys get here," said Dick.

"Agreed. I hope——"

"Listen!"

"Horses' hoofs, by George."

A party had arrived at the tavern.

The peddler, from behind the shutters of his front window, looked out, and could see them draw up before the long porch.

From the tavern itself came light enough to dispel the darkness on the road and reveal the figures of the newcomers.

They were mounted on good horses, and appeared to be a quartet of good-natured fellows, ready to laugh and joke.

Dismounting, they entered the tavern.

The peddler had made no move to retire, but his room was wrapped in darkness.

He believed Jesse James suspected him, and that there was danger of discovery unless he left the neighborhood, or assumed a new character.

The latter was more to his notion.

Leaving his room in his stocking feet, he made his way to a little loft just above the taproom.

There were cracks in the floor.

He could see fairly well, and hear beautifully.

In this cramped position he lay for almost an hour, taking in all that occurred below.

Such an occupation betrayed one fact; Jesse James made no mistake when he said he believed the peddler to be a detective sent by Pinkerton or the railroad authorities to run him down.

This was his mission.

A determined effort was about to be made to rid the country of these desperate men, whose work for years past had given the State of Missouri an unenviable reputation.

He was the advance courier. When his signal lighted the sky such a posse of men as had not been seen in this section since the war would enter among the foothills of the Ozarks, and if Jesse James escaped it would only be after the most severe tussle of his life.

His sharp ears caught much that was said, and the plans of the James gang were a secret no longer.

They had been called together to make a raid upon a train which was to carry an unusual amount of cash in the express car.

Their plans were well laid.

Jesse James originated them, as usual, and the others readily fell into his way of thinking.

By and by the peddler heard something that gave him a shock. He had no time to lose if he would baffle the express robbers.

When midnight arrived they would be gone, mounted on their swift horses.

Should he be left behind?

It was not like the man.

Accustomed to grappling with such emergencies, he could think quickly.

In five minutes he had made up his mind what his plan of campaign should be.

CHAPTER III.

CHASED THROUGH THE NIGHT.

He could not pass down and out by way of the stairs, because these led directly to the taproom.

If secrecy was desired, he must go about the business in another way.

He looked out of the window.

All was darkness below; but his eyes, being accustomed to the gloom, soon discovered that there was a ledge underneath.

A tree grew beside the house, and one of the limbs passed near his window; on another was fastened the sign that swung to and fro in the night wind out in front of the inn.

Between these two he must be able to reach the ground, if he proved himself possessed of any agility at all.

At any rate, he was not a hesitating man.

Leaving his pack where it lay, he clambered over the window sill.

His feet rested upon the ledge.

The branches of the tree touched his face, and he had no difficulty in securing a hold.

In three minutes his feet were on the ground, and that part of the business was done.

This was only a beginning, however.

Other things were to follow.

He must secure a mount, and at this hour of the night it would seem a rather difficult, if not wholly impossible, thing to do.

Without hesitation, he walked hastily down the main village street.

"This must be the place," he said, stopping in front of a peculiarly-built house.

He boldly stepped up and knocked loudly on the front door.

Presently a window above was opened.

A head, armed with a nightcap, was thrust out, and a deep voice growled:

"What the devil do you want, rousing a man from sleep at this unearthly hour?"

"Stonewall Jackson!" returned the other.

It was a strange answer, but it seemed to be very intelligible to the party at the window.

"Eh? Bless my soul—hold on there. I'll be down in a jiffy."

The head vanished.

Whatever a jiffy might be, the man of the house certainly lost little time in getting downstairs and opening the door.

He carried no light, which seemed a little singular, considering the fact that it was in the middle of the night when he was thus unceremoniously aroused.

"Walk in—who the deuce are you?"

"Let me ask that question."

"My name is Bob McKee."

"You're the man I'm looking for. Colonel Ridgway gave me your name."

It was a word to conjure with—Pinkerton's right-hand man, his chief of staff.

Every criminal of note knew and feared Ridgway.

"It's all right. Tell me what I can do for you."

"You have a horse, McKee?"

"An excellent one."

"I wish to borrow him."

"He is at your service."

"Now—at once."

"Come with me to the stable."

He picked up a lantern, struck a match and lighted the wick.

Together they walked back of the house to where a stable stood, the door of which the owner opened with his key.

The animal within was a fine fellow, and, having an eye for good horseflesh, the detective could not conceal his admiration.

Quickly saddle and bridle were placed in position, and all was ready.

He had a few questions to ask, and these were now forthcoming.

They seemed to concern the shortest route to the nearest telegraph station on the railroad.

When he had learned this, the detective started away, mounted on the horse.

Just as he parted from McKee, a man mounted the stairs of the tavern and knocked on the door of the room the detective had occupied.

This was Jesse James.

Upon reflection he had determined that it would be

wiser to put it directly to the man and have the matter settled.

Their horses were at the door ready saddled, and his companions stood at the foot of the stairs.

If he needed assistance a call would bring them to his side.

There was no response to his summons.

He repeated it.

Silence only reigned.

"Mister Peddler, are you awake?"

No answer.

"Open the door or I'll burst it in," he roared.

The fact that no one gave him warning not to do so further enraged the man.

He placed one shoulder against the door, gave an energetic shove, and the weak lock snapped.

There was a chance, of course, that he would be met with a bullet.

He took it.

Jesse James never stood back because it was a question of danger.

Darkness lay beyond.

He quickly had a match in his hand, and, when its light flamed up, he saw the room was empty.

"Frank! Dick!" he called.

"Hello, there!"

"Come up here."

He applied the match to a candle, and at once had a means of illumination.

By this time the others had reached his side, and were looking around. They expected to find the peddler dead, or cowed under the revolver of their companion.

"The cage is empty and the bird flown," said the man in the room, gruffly.

"What! That's his pack."

"He's deserted it. See! the window's open. Perhaps we can see the marks of his feet there."

Picking up the candle, he advanced.

It chanced that the wind lulled, and allowed him to bring the candle to the window.

Fresh scratches could be seen, and all were of one mind—that some one had gone out through that opening recently.

"Scared him off!" grunted Dick Liddell.

"Perhaps he was willing to go."

"Frank, what d'ye mean?" suspiciously.

"He may have gotten wind of our plans—we've been quite free with 'em to-night—and is now on his way to headquarters."

"Well, he may get there, and he may not; but when morning comes we'll have done our work. Who cares?"

"Hark, boys!"

Every ear was strained.

Through the open window there came the rapid pounding of a horse's hoofs.

The men looked each other in the face.

Something seemed to tell them the truth.

In this quiet Missouri village men did not go galloping madly around in the middle of the night unless some extraordinary occasion warranted such a course.

"That's him, Jesse!" ejaculated Dick.

"And he's gone to ruin our plans."

"To horse! We must run the varmint down and string him to a telegraph pole."

Then there was mounting in hot haste, with not a second to spare.

When the good people heard a wild clattering of many horses past their doors, as the cavalcade swept by, they understood then, if they had not known it before, that Jesse James and his gang had come to town.

It was easy enough to locate the single horseman as he left the place.

One main road entered and left the village, heading almost north and south.

Their horses were urged on.

It was impossible to tell whether they gained, or even whether they were overhauling the man, on account of the noise made by their own steeds.

Jesse James recognized this fact.

When they had gone several miles he ordered a sudden stoppage.

Drawing rein, they sat in the saddle, listening.

The gentle night breeze favored them.

They could hear the regular and rapid beat of a horse's hoofs on the road ahead.

"Good! Away we go again."

They fairly skimmed along, so rapid was their progress.

It seemed almost incredible that the man they pursued could have a horse equal to the splendid Kentucky thoroughbreds they bestrode.

Only one man in the village possessed a better steed and this was Bob McKee, the horse trader.

Although their reasoning was so sound and their logic so clear, when they came to take another reckoning about three miles farther on, the sounds ahead seemed just about as far away as before.

This was aggravating.

It was even more—disappointing.

"Faster!" gritted Jesse James.

"We must get him," said another.

Again they flew along.

In a short time they came to where the road forked and here a question arose.

Which way had the other gone?

They listened.

Some were possessed of remarkably keen ears, but they failed to hear any sound that could be set down as the one they looked for.

What was to be done?

Had their man come to a halt?

Perhaps he might have abandoned his horse?

Both of these guesses were far out of the way, as Jesse James well knew.

Here his sagacity came into play.

He jumped from his horse to see if he could find the trail.

The breeze blew too hard for a match to remain lighted, and no one among them had a lantern.

So he was reduced to another plan.

This seemed simple enough.

One road was the pike.

The other was a plain dirt road.

A horse, galloping along the latter, would hardly make a sound.

It was patent in the mind of the desperado that the horseman must have taken the dirt road.

He did not mean to let any chance escape him, however, but hastily divided his force.

Frank was to lead those who had kept up the mad chase along the pike.

"If you can catch the spy, hang him up," was the parting injunction of the leader.

"Leave that to me."

They were off.

Down the pike clattered Frank James and several of the desperadoes, while the robber led the balance of the wild gang over the dirt road.

The railroad was not very far away.

Both roads would cross it within a mile of each other, as Jesse James well knew.

There was hardly a foot of land in this vicinity with which he was not familiar.

He made it his business to study these things in order to be successful in his schemes.

It paid.

He believed he had the best chance of running across the man they desired to take, for it was almost certain that he had chosen the dirt road at the forks.

As their success thus far in overtaking him had been of such a disappointing character, it could hardly be expected that this would change.

Nevertheless they dashed on at headlong speed.

The railroad was in sight.

There was a station at this point, for a water tank stood near by, and trains stopped in order to supply the engine with water.

Up to the station dashed the gang.

The telegraph operator sat there with a piece of paper in one hand, and his finger on the key of the instrument, ready to send a message when he received an answering signal.

His finger began to work on the sounder, and the regular drone started up.

"Stop that, my friend, and hand that message over to me," said a stern voice.

The operator glanced up.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SOUTHBOUND EXPRESS.

The telegraph operator looked up to see a head thrust in at the opening, and to find himself covered by a heavy revolver.

There could be no mistaking the manner of the man behind that weapon.

His eyes said "shoot" every time.

The operator was no fool.

He knew that it would probably cost him his life to refuse, and he still had some desire to live.

The railroad or telegraph company did not pay him for braving the fury of desperadoes.

He would not do it.

Consequently he handed up the paper.

Jesse James glued his eye to it.

Although the writing was hastily done, he could easily make it out.

Detain No. 7. Jesse James and gang waiting at water tank, Dutch Creek, to rob the express.

That was all.

"Who was this to be sent to?" he asked, sharply.

The operator might have lied to an ordinary man, but he knew to whom he was speaking.

Jesse James was not to be trifled with.

"To the operator at the junction."

"When is the express due there?"

"At one-twenty."

A glance at the clock showed that it lacked half an hour of that time.

"Does it stop between here and there?"

"No."

"But comes to a halt here?"

"Yes, for water."

"Is there any telegraph station between?"

"No."

"That will do. Dick, pick out a man and set him to watch this fellow. Kill him if he tries to betray us."

"I've got an old operator here—he can tell if the man tries to send a message about us."

"Bring him along."

In another minute a man sat in the little telegraph office with the operator.

He held a revolver.

When the man at the junction demanded the reason why he had been called up, the operator was compelled to make some foolish reply.

He sat there sullenly.

Minutes passed.

Frank James and the rest of the gang came riding along the railroad track.

Preparations were at once made for the work in hand. The methods of Jesse James were original in their way—other train robbers copied them, and profited by them.

Generally some water-tank station was selected, and members of the gang got aboard.

At a certain spot one of them crawled into the engine and made the engineer, at the muzzle of the revolver, bring his train to a stand.

Then the others boarded it, and the express car was broken open—if the messenger resisted he did so on

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peril of his life, for these desperate men would not hesitate at such a trifle.

Another favorite method was to hold the train at such a place.

This was to be the plan on this night, for they were out in numbers sufficiently strong to accomplish any such job.

It was now time for the express to reach the junction, and Jesse James hung about the telegraph office as though expecting something.

Presently the operator received a message.

"Who was that from?" asked the outlaw.

"Operator at the junction."

"What did he say?"

"Southwestern express from St. Louis passed there at one twenty-three—three minutes late."

"Jack, does he tell the truth?" to the man in the operator's den.

"Yes."

"That's good. Now, you can do us no more harm. Jack, come out; we may need you. Remember, man, some one will be around all the time, so you'd better keep your own counsel until the job's done."

With that they withdrew.

There was just twenty minutes in which to arrange matters so that the job could be put through without trouble.

Hardly had they been gone three minutes before the operator started, listened eagerly, put his hand on the key, and presently was engrossed with the conversation he was carrying on with a man perched in the top of a telegraph pole some three miles or more up the line, and who must be an old telegraph operator, judging from the fact that he carried a line repairer's instruments with him, and was able to transmit a message from any point.

This is what he picked up:

"Is your office clear of those men?"

"You mean Jesse James' gang—yes. They are outside somewhere getting ready. Who are you?"

"The man who gave you the message, and then rode up the track."

"Where are you?"

"Perched on a pole about three miles north."

"Warn the train."

"That's what I'm here for. Can it get past your place at full speed?"

"Yes."

"What of the switch?"

"If it's turned, a red light will warn you. A white light means safety."

"Good. I hear the train coming."

That was all.

It surely was enough.

The operator lay back in his chair again, appalled when he saw a head thrust in.

Fortunately it did not belong to the man who knew how to take a message.

"Who was you talking to?" demanded Dick.

"The fellow at the junction asked me if I had a bottle with me, for he was sure I was off. I told him to mind his own business."

"Was that all?"

"Yes."

Liddell glared at him as, though suspicious, but he could not see any way in which their plans might be divulged, since the express had passed the junction, and there was no telegraph station between that place and the water-tank.

So he slunk away.

All was now ready for the final scene.

Whether success would come to them or not depended much on luck.

Their horses were hidden near by, so that as soon as the job had been made complete, they could leap upon the backs of the animals and fly.

Every precaution was taken, because it meant a serious piece of business to be captured.

An ignominious death might follow.

Their past was well known. Many crimes that had been committed by other parties were laid at their door, as is customary in such cases.

It was nearly time for the train.

The lost three minutes might have been made up, and again it might not; that was a small matter, at any rate, to the waiting robbers.

What they were most interested in was the fact of the express stopping.

All the information Jesse James had been able to gather had been to the effect that it was a regular business for the train to halt for a supply of water at this place.

Unless fortune played them a trick, it really looked as though the game must be working directly into their hands.

Ears were strained to catch the far-away rumble; but the breeze was blowing in the wrong direction for this.

Finally one of the men dropped down beside the track and placed his ear on a rail.

Sound travels in this way much better than through the air, and one may catch the rumble of a train when the same person is unable to hear the slightest noise erect.

"She's coming!" he announced.

This caused the others to adopt the same system of tactics, and they were successful, too.

Yes, the train was coming.

Several miles still lay between, but this does not amount to much to a fast train, and with each passing minute the flyer would be closer.

Jesse James now began to place his men.

Two were stationed just at the water-tank, ready to leap upon the engine as soon as it came to a stand, and control matters.

Others were scattered along so as to command the balance of the train.

As the express car was the object of their special interest, Jesse James took charge of the four who had been selected for this part of the business.

All was now ready.

The train had annihilated distance, and her rumble could be heard without any particular effort.

The light in front of the iron horse loomed up far along the track.

At first it looked like a star of the first magnitude, some miles away, for the track was straight.

"She's stopped!"

"Hang the luck! It's true."

"What's wrong?"

The train-robbers were surprised and displeased at this unexpected event.

They endeavored to conceive some reason why it should take place, and stood there in knots, looking down the track.

Jesse James hurried over to the telegraph office, where he found one of his men on guard.

"Has he been up to anything?" he asked.

"Not that I have heard."

"Received or sent any message?"

"Yes. Some one asked if the express would be down the line on time, and he answered that he was of the opinion it would be a little late."

Jesse James smiled grimly.

"He's a joker, eh? A little late! Well, I reckon so. That's all, is it?"

"Everything of consequence."

It was evident that the man had reached his station at the window of the office just too late to hear the exceedingly interesting conversation that took place by wire between the agent in the building and the man who had climbed a pole some miles up the track and made a connection.

That would have highly edified the train robber, could he have heard it.

"Remain on guard until the train stops. Then let the operator go to the devil, and you run to assist us in the game. D'ye understand?"

"Perfectly."

"Good. A few minutes will decide the business. I wish I knew what made the train stop up yonder. Here, ask the operator."

The question was put.

Now, the telegraph agent knew as well as he breathed that the detective must have signaled the engineer in some way to pull up.

It was not his business to tell all he knew, however, and he lied unblushingly.

"Perhaps they've got a hotbox on the engine, or it may be some accident has occurred. I never knew them to stop there before," he said.

"If they don't move on pretty soon, I'll send half of the boys up after 'em."

"No need of that—they'll be along soon," said the agent, quickly.

Jesse James was watching him.

He distrusted the man.

In his opinion all that had kept the other from betraying him was the lack of an opportunity.

"Try any funny business and it'll cost you your life. My man here has orders to let daylight through you."

"Oh! I'm all right. This ain't none of my game. I'm out of it, don't you forget it."

"Then you're a wise chap."

With which the notorious train robber stepped out of the shanty and walked upon the tracks to ascertain how affairs stood at the water-tank.

Some five minutes or so had elapsed since the train came to a stand.

What could detain them?

Even as he stood there by the water-tank looking, he heard the puff-puff of the engine.

Looking closely Jesse James saw that the light moved.

Yes, the train was again in motion.

Would it advance or retreat?

Eagerly he strained his eyes to see.

Then he called out hoarsely:

"Boys, back to your places—she's coming as sure as thunder, this time."

CHAPTER V.

BAFFLED SCHEMES.

There could be no mistake about this.

The express was on the move, and bearing down upon them rapidly.

Eagerly the men hurried to the posts to which they had been appointed.

The trap stood open.

When the fatal train slowed up and stopped at the water-tank it would be in their power.

Larger grew the light.

The faint rumble had now become a decided roar, as the heavy engine drew the long line of coaches, dining-car and sleepers along.

It was about time to slacken up.

Each train robber crouched in his place, with nerves strained to the utmost tension.

It was a moment of great suspense.

The destiny of some man hung in the balance.

Why did not the engine whistle down brakes?

It was thundering on.

The agent declared that it always stopped for water here—Jesse James knew this fact himself from acquired information.

At the same time facts were stubborn things to subdue, and here the train was rushing on as though the engineer had not the least idea of stopping.

Jesse James gritted his teeth.

Too late he saw his mistake.

One of the men realized it, too, and with the rage of a brute, sprang to the switch.

It was his intention, had he been granted time, to whirl this around.

The express would plunge upon the siding and become a complete wreck.

The idea was demoniacal, and could only have originated in the brain of a fiend.

Jesse James had not come to this point.

Furious as he was at the lack of wisdom which would have prepared a red light with which to stop the train, he was not prepared to commit murder by the wholesale.

Hence, he leaped after the wretch, divining his wicked purpose.

The switch was locked, however, and would have baffled the demon.

By this time the express was up to them.

She went thundering by, shaking the ground with her swift passage.

It was a bitter disappointment.

The treasure of the express car was so near and yet so far.

It would have been next to impossible to have found a madder set of men.

They were furious.

When the train whirled by they were absolutely speechless, but once it was gone, and the red lanterns on the rear stared them in the face like a pair of evil eyes, a volley of curses arose.

It was terrible to hear.

Some one must have betrayed them.

Instinctively their thoughts flew to the operator.

Did he have a hand in it?

Jesse James sprang in the direction of the small house, while his men trooped after, under the impression that something interesting was about to take place there.

They would have enjoyed helping to string the agent up to one of the poles in order to make him tell the exact truth.

When they reached the station they found it devoid of human occupancy.

The agent had fled.

He must have guessed what was coming, and made a dead break through the open window.

The fierce men crowded in.

How they glared around.

Jesse James bent over the operator's desk—his eye had been caught by a paper.

A dozen words had been hastily scrawled upon it—the ink was not yet dry.

He read:

"JESSE JAMES:—Not my doing—the man who gave ~~me~~ message must have stopped train."

The truth burst upon him.

He was like a baffled tiger in his fury.

As there was no one at hand upon whom he could vent this feeling, it would have to be bottled up for future use.

He certainly owed the detective one.

What he had hit upon was really the truth, and the detective, who had played the part of a peddler, was on the express train as it thundered by the water-tank station.

He had signaled the train after his brief talk with the operator, and explained the situation to the conductor.

This worthy, anxious to save his train from the hands of the robbers, readily agreed to run past at full speed.

It was done.

They had a glimpse of the James gang as the train went by, and this was proof enough that the detective had told the truth.

At the next station below he alighted.

The passengers did not know what a narrow escape they had experienced.

Nor was the detective's work done.

He had come to this region for a purpose, but that was not yet accomplished.

The saving of the train was but a mere incident, and until it came he had not the least idea concerning it.

At this station he sent a telegram.

It was briefly worded, but meant much to the man receiving it.

This was better than fires upon the tops of the mountains, one of the signals arranged in order to bring about

the advance of the posse that was to hunt the James gang.

It was silent, and gave no warning.

As chance would have it, the operator at this station was a friend of Jesse James.

In the message he read danger to the Missouri outlaw, and having long desired to do him a favor he now saw the opportunity.

He knew where lived those who would get a message to the outlaw with little delay.

The detective had not been gone from his office ten minutes before the man slapped his thigh and declared:

"I'll do it, sure pop. Such a move will square our old account that I've never forgotten. Yes, I'll do it."

He hurriedly wrote something.

Then, as no trains were due for several hours, he felt that he could desert his post instead of taking his usual nap.

Into the night he plunged.

Brought up in this region, the man knew every turn of the road.

He had been moving on for about half an hour, and the darkness seemed to grow blacker instead of lighter, when he heard a sound that was so singular he had to stop and listen.

This was nothing more nor less than the tread of a troop of horsemen.

The cavalcade approached.

He hid himself in the bushes, believing these were the officers for whom the detective had wired.

They must have made good time to reach the scene of action so soon.

The operator crouched low, not caring to be discovered and searched, for the message on his person would incriminate him.

Now they were abreast of him.

There was heard no laughing; these men were not in the humor for that.

One called out just then:

"That's Bigelow's fire-signal, Jesse. I could almost swear it means danger."

"Danger be hanged," growled another voice.

The operator recognized it.

"Is Jesse James there?" he sang out.

The cavalcade drew up.

"Who spoke?"

"I."

The man broke out from the bushes and appeared on the scene.

"Where's Jesse?"

"Here. Who the deuce are you?"

"Strike a light, man; you'll know me then."

The outlaw, bending forward in his saddle, drew out a match and struck it, the trees shading him from the wind.

One glance he took at the man's face.

"It's you, John, is it?"

"Yes."

The operator thrust into his hand the paper he had prepared in case he was compelled to send the warning along.

Jesse James was able to read its contents at almost a single glance.

He exhibited no great surprise.

"I expected as much. Anyhow, I'll remember it of you, John."

The operator turned and made his way back to the station as rapidly as he could.

When the outlaw leader found himself alone with his men he satisfied their desire to know what was in the wind.

They soon found out.

"Then that was a signal fire," said one.

"No doubt of it; the enemy is advancing."

"Look—isn't that another?"

They had left the shelter of the trees, and were in a position to scan the mountains.

The fire which had been already sighted was to the east.

This new light shone in the south.

"You're right; Jed Harkins smells danger."

"Perhaps he's seen the other fire."

"He has orders to light up only when he sees the danger himself. It's evident to me that this is part of a big attempt to corner us. Enemies are drawing in from every side."

His men uttered exclamations of alarm.

Many of them believed the time would come when Jesse James' star would no longer be in the ascendant, and a force be sent against him that would surely overcome the bold bandit.

It began to look as though that time was now about to dawn.

"What shall we do?"

He seemed perfectly cool.

In the first place, he had no fear of the consequences, and, again, would not have shown it before his men, even if he had.

"We must separate."

"Yes."

"Into two or more parties. I fancy you care to go it alone; strike out now."

"I reckon I will."

"Very good, Ben. You know the old signal to get together again when this blows over."

"I'll be there, captain."

He galloped away in the darkness, to follow out some scheme of his own. Perhaps he had the pipes laid for just such an occasion as this, and knew how to escape.

No one else followed his example.

They had a desire to keep together.

Men differ under such circumstances, some preferring to seek safety alone, while others feel better to be in company.

Jesse James quickly divided his force.

One part he took under his own guidance, while one whom they trusted was to look after the other.

Good-bys were said.

It was uncertain whether they would ever come together again.

Brighter grew the signal fires, and it was evident that their sentries meant their warning to be so broad that it could not be mistaken.

The train robbers owed them much.

They might have been taken unawares only for the vigilance of these men.

When the two parties had separated, Jesse James led his men toward the west.

As yet there was no signal fire in that direction to indicate that enemies were there.

There was no positive indication of security.

They might run into a trap at any minute.

If it came to that it meant fight, and they were as able to do that as any men; indeed, it must be a bold posse that could stop this gang.

There were four others with Jesse James when he broke company, and each squad sought safety in a different direction when they reached the cross-roads, one going south, the other west.

"We're in for a hard ride, boys," said the leader, as he rode at their head.

"Here's one that don't care a picayune, if the hosses are in fair condition."

The others echoed the fellow's bold cry, and the horses were again put in motion.

They had taken a roundabout course, but now headed for the mountains.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DANCE AT THE INN.

In the meantime, Silas Cox—that was the detective-peddler's name—had quickly gathered his posse, who were ready and awaiting his orders.

Before the night was over they were hot on the trail of the train robbers.

Acting under the orders of their chief, they were constantly on the lookout for an ambush.

It was a wild chase.

They passed over several farms, and, fearful lest the fugitives might have doubled on their trail in order to deceive those who followed, the men searched each barn and haystack, also questioning those with whom they came in contact.

Then the chase kept up all night and far into the next day, the posse learning the direction the outlaws had taken from the farmers they passed.

Another night had come.

The wind still blew in gusts.

The detective and his posse for a couple of hours had lain in the woods, hiding.

On the road they had managed to pick up enough to eat from outlying farmhouses and such places to be met with.

All were weary and utterly fagged out.

When, therefore, about four o'clock in the afternoon the guide had informed them that they were near the place where he believed Jesse James and his confederates would stop, and that nothing could be done until night had set its seal upon the earth, the men, one and all, welcomed the pleasing intelligence, and, dropping down, went to sleep.

How sweet that sleep was!

Nature was completely tired out, and the few hours did much to build her up again.

They slept like logs.

Silas Cox was the first to awaken.

All was darkness around him.

He could hear the wind slashing through the tops of the trees, which sighed and moaned before the furious blast.

Down underneath the wind hardly came.

Cox managed to light his lantern.

Then he looked around.

When the detective consulted a little silver watch he carried, he found that the time they had set was near at hand.

They must be moving.

One by one they were aroused.

How they hated to wake up; but the necessity was imperative, and, acting under such a man as Silas Cox, they dared not disobey orders.

So the whole party was finally gotten into motion and started off.

Through the darkness they went.

The pace was slow.

As those they sought were not far away, it was just as well that they use a certain amount of caution in making their advance.

Suddenly Cox paused.

He craned his neck as though listening.

"What is that noise?" he asked.

The others listened.

"Sounds to me like a cracked violin," said Cox.

"That's it," said another.

"Captain, you've struck it. That's a dancin' tune, and some one has got the fiddle in his hands. It means a dance."

"Then Jesse James won't be there."

"Won't eh? That's just what he hankers after, a little excitement. Besides, these people are all his friends, and wouldn't betray him."

"Well, we'll advance again."

Again the posse was on the move.

The men understood something of the situation, and that they were about to engage in a rather peculiar business.

Anxious to make an end of the matter, they were ready to attempt any movement so long as it was approved by their leader, in whom they placed the utmost confidence.

The music increased in volume.

There was also carried to their ears the sound of laughter, in girlish voices.

Undoubtedly a merry-making was in progress at old Winterbottom's place, for such it was called, and his cracked violin had been brought into play in order to keep time to the light, flying feet.

Silas Cox hardly knew whether to be pleased or not at this occurrence.

It might serve as a blind to mask their advance, and in this way be made available.

He could not see that it would harm them in any particular way.

Presently the light shone through the trees.

The tavern was in sight.

A halt was called.

"Wait here, men. Lie low, and no noise."

He then went off to reconnoitre.

The house was not far away.

It was merely a cabin, a strange place, such as may only be seen in the backwoods of the States bordering the Mississippi.

Here accommodations were supposed to be had for man and beast, but the latter was certain to fare little better than the former, so far as provender might be concerned.

Old Winterbottom was a quaint character, and so wedded to his violin that whenever he had any travelers at his inn they were apt to suffer excruciating torture from hearing the never-ceasing variations of the "Arkansaw Traveler."

Soon the detective would look in upon the scene.

A dozen and a half young fellows and their best girls had come to the tavern to have a country ball.

All sorts of vehicles could be seen outside, the horses tied to the fence and posts.

Some had come on horseback, the favorite method of traveling in certain portions of Missouri as well as in Kentucky.

The scene was inspiring.

Even the stern minion of the law was influenced by the music from the cracked fiddle, and smiled to see the evolutions of the young country dancers.

To them grace was an unknown quantity, at least among the swains, who seemed to believe that the more noise they made the better they were doing their whole duty.

Then Silas Cox remembered what he had come for, and his eyes assumed a look of business.

Using extreme care, he managed to get to a point where a better view could be had.

At the same time he was screened by the shadow of the walls.

The strains of "Old Dan Tucker" floated out.

At times the sound of the fiddle became a mere thread, such was the loud stamping of feet and the voices of the energetic dancers.

They were happy.

Laughter floated on the air.

At the same time, no doubt, there were the usual little jealousies and heart-burnings among those who appeared so gay.

Human nature is much the same the wide world over; custom changes the surface, but in the heart we have the same passions and loves that the ancients suffered.

Silas Cox projected his head a trifle beyond the side of the window.

The scene was before him.

His eyes, of course, surveyed it with but one object in view.

This was to discover the outlaws.

Three of them he had already placed—that is, he was reasonably sure of his men, judging from their actions.

Where were the others?

Jesse James and Frank were missing.

Could they be dancing?

He discovered a couple of young fellows serving as wall flowers, who did not appear to be over-happy, and this gave him his cue.

Their partners had been monopolized by those who were not in the original programme.

Thus inspired, Cox began to watch the dancers closely as they marched by, to the inspiring strains of "Old Dan Tucker," and success greeted him.

First he found Frank James.

His brother was discovered last of all.

The detective smiled, and there was a deal of meaning to that look.

It was not the first time the James boys had been caught in a trap.

Up to the present, however, they had always managed to escape from such holes, and it was possible they might do so again.

Silas Cox thought he had a good thing, but he was not dead sure.

He knew the old proverb about the "slip between the cup and the lip."

The fun had become even more furious in the dance hall of the tavern.

Whoever it was wielding the bow, he played as though the witches that chased Tam O'Shanter across the bridge were after him.

The feet of the dancers seemed never to tire, and quite a cloud of dust gradually arose during the progress of each dance.

Suddenly a man staggered into the room, and looked around him.

Cox thought he had seen him before somewhere, but did not know what the circumstances were under which they had met.

Nevertheless he was interested.

He watched the other closely.

When the man had flung that wild glance all around him, his gaze seemed to become glued upon the figure of Jesse James, who lounged in one corner with his feet crossed, picking his teeth, and watching the mad evolutions of the country dancers imitating the negro hoedown. With a caution, born of instinct, he had seated himself out of range of any of the windows.

As straight as he could make his way the fellow-advanced toward the outlaw.

Several times he encountered the dancers, and gave them a savage push aside.

Justice overtook him.

The fat couple, spreading themselves in great glee before the young people, bore down upon them like an avalanche.

His arm attempted to ward off the threatened collision, but in vain.

They overwhelmed him.

There was a crash that made the timbers of the floor creak, followed by shrieks of laughter.

It was only by extreme good luck that the stranger was not mashed as flat as a pancake under the ponderous bodies.

He managed to fall between, so that they came down on either side.

Quick to recognize his chances for escape, the man crawled out from under them.

He staggered, gasping for breath, and glanced around at the merry-makers.

What was fun in their eyes was serious business with him.

Jesse James no longer maintained that easy and indifferent attitude.

He sprang into life and action, leaping forward and clutching the newcomer.

"Dix, where in the fiend's name did you come from, and what brings you here?"

The man, by an effort, shook off his fatigue.

"Captain, you have been tracked!"

"Tracked—who by?"

"The same man who blocked that train hold-up."

"Perhaps; but I don't believe it."

"But he's led a posse here."

"What's that?"

"They're here now."

"Come, Dix; you're raving."

Nevertheless, Jesse James tossed the cigar he had been smoking out of the window.

"Captain, I tell you they're here—all around the house. You're trapped, man. They're sworn to have your life. I've risked mine to warn you."

And the man sank back against the wall to recover his breath.

The next instant the room was in total darkness.

CHAPTER VII.

JESSE JAMES AT BAY.

The action of Jesse James relieved the detective from further worry as to what should be done in the premises.

"Silence!" roared the outlaw, as cries of fright arose.

Men ceased talking, and girls no longer screamed.

"Gentlemen and ladies," said the outlaw, "there promises to be a little scrimmage around here shortly, and as I should hate to see any of you hurt, I beg that you will depart at once. You know who I am—outside officers are waiting for a chance to capture or kill me. Don't wait, but vamoose the ranch."

His words carried conviction with them.

The girls looked scared.

Wraps were snatched up amid little screams.

For a minute confusion reigned.

The fat proprietor and his wife hardly knew what to do, but Jesse James ordered them out with the rest, wishing a clear field.

There was a little confusion at the door, but it did not last a minute.

Five desperate men now commanded the windows with their revolvers, and the first man who attempted to enter that room would fall down dead.

Strategy must come into play.

Several of his men were grouped near by, awaiting his orders, and to these he gave a command in a low tone.

Then, with five of them he moved away, sneaking around the side of the house.

The one who remained called out:

"Hello! in the house!"

An answer came gruffly back.

"What the devil do you want?"

"Is Jesse James there?"

"Yes—you know he is."

"I call on him to surrender."

"Go to blazes!"

"The house is surrounded—escape is cut off and we're bound to bag you all."

"Come, be easy on us now."

"If those who are with Jesse and Frank James will come out and give themselves up, they can go free."

"D'ye hear that, boys—why don't you go?" said the gruff voice—there followed a laugh, but not a single outlaw came forth.

Their fortunes were united with those of Jesse James, and they must live or die with him.

It was folly to offer them liberty while he was doomed—they would sink or swim in the same boat with him.

Of course the detective's agent had an object in all this thing.

He wanted to keep the attention of the outlaws directed toward the front of the house until Cox and his five men could enter the rear.

The rapid firing of revolvers, flashing in the darkness, would be a signal for those outside to rush in and join the fray, passing through doors or windows, it mattered not which, so long as they managed to effect an entrance.

"Those who refuse to surrender can expect no quarter. We will soon rush in and kill every man who resists," continued the officer.

"Rush on, then. We're ready for you," came the fierce response.

Meanwhile Cox and his five men, skirting the side of the inn, came to a door in the rear.

Entering, they found themselves in the kitchen, where a fat negress was engaged in making coffee for the dancers.

She was as big as a barrel—indeed, this seemed to be a fat people's paradise, seeing that all who lived under the roof of the tavern were of uncommon girth.

At sight of half a dozen desperate-looking men entering her sacred domain with awful revolvers in their hands the negress sat down on the floor, threw her apron over her head, and began to groan dismally while rocking her ample body to and fro.

No doubt she thought the war had come again.

Without paying any attention to the woman, the men passed through the kitchen.

Here the light ceased.

They must grope their way, and with five desperadoes in the darkness beyond this was apt to prove a trying piece of business.

Outside could be heard the voice of the man who argued with Jesse James, having in view only the consumption of time and the attraction of the outlaw's attention.

The darkness bothered them.

They could not see their foes, and must open fire at random in the direction of a voice.

Here was the door leading to the dance room.

Confusion!

It was fast!

Some one on the other side had been shrewd enough to accomplish this feat.

It began to look as though they would have to organize a regular siege and starve the enemy out, or else force a desperate issue.

One of the men suggested that they ascend the stairs which were close at hand. He had been in the house often, and knew something of the interior arrangements.

This whisper Cox received with pleasure, for he was somewhat worried as to the course he should now pursue.

Up the stairs they crept.

The self-constituted guide led them into a room which he said was directly over the one used for dancing, and now held as a fort by the outlaws.

What good would all this do?

"There's a trap in the floor here, captain," said the guide, in a low voice.

"Find it."

"I will."

What good would this do? If the trap were open, would they dare drop through it one by one and engage the enemy?

The situation was growing desperate, and something must soon drop.

They were here to face danger, and not to try and avoid its ugly front. Hence, what would be the use of leaving a scheme untried because there was a space of peril back of it?

He had followed his man and kept a hand on him.

"I've found it," came the whisper.

Between them they gently laid the trap back on the floor.

All was darkness below, above, and around.

Not even a sound could be heard save the swish of the night-wind in the trees, or the trampling of some departing horse.

Were there enemies below?

Silas Cox, prone on the floor, thrust his head through the open trap, straining eyes and ears in the endeavor to discover the truth.

How he longed for some ball that could be dropped, and, coming in contact with the lower floor, burst into flame.

Such a thing would not only betray the presence of the enemy, but give the officers a splendid chance to use their firearms.

As it was not within reach, however, he had to be content with other means.

To hang and drop into the darkness was too much of a good thing. Had they a rope, it might be possible to slip down and form a combination against the enemy.

He whispered to the other.

"What," said this worthy.

There was a bed in the room.

It proved to be an old-fashioned one, with a rope crossed diamond-shape in place of slats.

This the man knew because he had slept in this same bed a number of times.

With his knife he cut the rope and rapidly secured many lengths of it.

Then, trailing it after him, he crept back to where he had left Silas Cox.

When the detective found what had been done, he was well pleased.

They searched further for some place where one end of the rope could be secured.

This was found.

A heavy chest stood near by, and to an iron ring at one end they fastened the rope.

All was now ready.

Who would go first?

This Silas Cox looked upon as his business, nor would he think of allowing any other the privilege of doing so.

Holding his revolver in his teeth, he was about to descend, when an idea struck him.

A lantern was in his possession, which could be lighted, and then concealed by a mask.

He would need this.

Retiring from the room, he applied a match, and speedily had the thing arranged.

Then he returned.

A whispered order to his lieutenant, which was to be passed on, then all was ready.

Silas Cox let his feet pass through the opening, clutched the rope, hung suspended in mid-air a few seconds, and then landed gently on the floor below.

Here he crouched, revolver in hand, awaiting the coming of his companions.

They soon joined him.

One by one they came down the rope.

It might be they came to their death, but not a man of them held back, nor was the least sign of hesitation seen.

Three, four, five—all were down.

The supreme moment was near at hand.

Cox had not been idle while waiting for the men to reach his side.

He could not use his eyes because of the intense darkness, but this did not prevent him from making a good use of his ears.

In this way he learned the lay of the land, at any rate, and knew just where the windows of the large room were situated.

It might be presumed that the outlaws would be clustered along the wall farthest from the windows, and in this direction he turned his attention.

Still, no sound betrayed them.

He would have given much to have heard a muttered word, even if it were an oath.

Cox had picked up something from the floor, and this he now held in his hand.

It was nothing more nor less than a lady's slipper, lost and abandoned by some fair one in the haste of the departure.

Never mind. It was putting it to a strange use, but all's fair in love or war.

He hurled it in the quarter where he supposed about all the outlaws would be grouped.

It struck the wall and fell to the floor, but not even an exclamation betrayed the presence of Jesse James and his rough crowd.

This was aggravating.

He must resort to the last measure.

"Ready!" he whispered in the ear of his nearest neighbor, who, by a movement of the arm, passed the word along to the next one.

In this way all were put on their guard.

Suddenly Cox flashed his lantern upon the scene, directing its rays toward the quarter where he believed the men to be.

Disappointment followed.

A door was open, but, beyond themselves, the big room seemed to contain not a living soul.

his followers, was ready to send a volley that would certainly drop some of the outlaws.

Only empty space confronted them.

They could not fire at that.

The open door told the story as well as words could do, and it was evident that those they sought were somewhere back there.

"Follow me."

With these words the detective was through the door, lantern in one hand and revolver in the other; he presented a plain mark for any one who might be hidden beyond; but in his eagerness and enthusiasm Silas Cox did not stop to think of that.

When he had passed beyond the door he stumbled over a human figure that was sprawling out in his way.

Only with a great effort did the detective keep from measuring his length on the floor.

This would have been quite a disaster under the circumstances, for he carried the only means of light with him.

Quickly recovering himself, he clapped his revolver at the head of the man.

Then, as he held his lantern at the fellow's head, he discovered that it was the landlord.

"What are you after?" he demanded.

"I was afraid the house might go—burn," stammered the fellow.

"Well?"

"I have a little money hidden away—a very small amount, but it is my all, and I would like to save it."

"That's all right, but I hardly imagine anything will happen to your house. Hold on, you are just the man I want to see."

"Eh?"

"The men have left the danceroom by this door—where will it take them?"

"Out of doors."

"I don't think they've gone there—my men have the house well surrounded, and we've heard no alarm. Where else can they go?"

"Well, by passing through that door yonder the cellar lies before them."

"We'll search the rest of the house first."

Cox was not discouraged.

It took more disappointments than this to bring down his enthusiasm.

From room to room they flew.

The only living soul they discovered was the terrified fiddler, who had concealed himself underneath a bed in a room.

He was ignominiously hauled out, under the impression that it was one of the others; but when the mistake was discovered they had no use for the fellow.

Thus the whole inn was speedily searched, and no traces of the five men discovered.

It began to look as a certainty that they must have sought refuge in the cellar.

The door was cautiously opened.

To go down bearing that light would be to court death instantly, and Silas Cox would allow none of his men to attempt it any more than he would try the same thing himself.

Another lantern was found.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GAS BALLS.

This was a keen disappointment to the detective and his men; he had expected to see the men they had come to destroy standing at bay against the wall, and, with

Lighting this, he tied a piece of cord to it, and thus lowered away.

If the outlaws were in the cellar they would speedily manifest their presence, for to have a light among them was about the last thing they could care to suffer.

Nor was this manifestation long delayed.

The lantern had not yet reached the ground, and was swinging in the air a foot or so from the cellar floor, when a muttered oath came up from the depths below.

Quickly following this there was a crash.

Darkness!

One of the outlaws had hurled a billet of wood with fatal precision.

When "hard and soft substance" come into collision the impact is generally to the disadvantage of the latter.

It was so in this case.

The billet of wood was unharmed by the collision, but the lantern, with its glass shattered into small fragments, its light extinguished and the wire frame twisted outrageously, hung like a dead weight at the end of the rope.

Silas Cox drew it up.

He had no more use for it.

Although the lantern had met with such a sudden fate, it had done its work.

The detective was sure now that the men he sought were in the cellar.

That was a point gained.

He had not expected the lantern to be let alone unless the cellar was empty, and this would have been a source of disappointment to him.

The question which arose now was quite a serious one to dispose of.

How were they to get at the men?

It was all very well to think of making a dash upon their stronghold. Perhaps they might be laid out before the whole posse was killed, but one could find a poor satisfaction in that.

Glory is well enough in its way, but it does a man little good after he is dead.

Cox preferred going about his work in another way.

So long as the end he had in view was accomplished, it mattered little with regard to the means to be employed.

He went outside to give his men an idea regarding the situation.

Running again to Winterbottom again, he had the fat landlord tell him all there was to know about the cellar, the location of its windows, and such small things that were likely to prove valuable.

Then he posted men at the several small windows, giving them particular orders what to do in case the outlaws tried to leave their hiding-place.

All was now ready.

If the detective had any game in view he could open it up.

He went to the kitchen.

There was a good fire in the range.

Taking out a bottle he poured some liquid on a number of pieces of rag.

Each of these he bound up with some cotton batting upon which he had previously poured a little kerosene from a can.

Thus he had half a dozen fireballs arranged, and once

lighted they could hardly be extinguished; at least they would smoulder, and smoke, which was just what he wanted.

The liquid would create a gas that while not inflammable, would soon reduce a human being to a state of coma, when he would not raise a hand to help himself.

This was his game.

If the men below could outwit him they would be more shrewd than he gave them credit for, and under such circumstances another plan would have to be tried.

All was ready.

One of his men stood at the door.

Silas drew a match, ignited it, and, as the bundle of cotton blazed up, with a dexterous cast it was sent below.

Instantly a commotion arose.

The outlaws recognized the fact, as they believed that they were about to be burned out.

A rush was made.

Several feet trampled on the blazing cotton, and in a moment the fire went out.

It was not utterly extinguished, and in just the condition to throw off the heavy gas that would soon lay men out.

Hardly had the outlaws succeeded in accomplishing this feat, than the door above opened, and a second fireball came sailing down upon them, its passage fanning the flames furiously.

Again they had to jump upon the blazing ball of cotton and trample the fire to death.

More gas escaped.

It began to make itself felt.

Silas Cox knew just what the men would do when the next ball was thrown.

He lighted it above, partly trampled it so that the fire was put out, and hurled the smoking mass down the cellar-steps.

Although no light was shown, a shot accompanied the action.

The bullet buried itself in the door, close to the head of the detective.

He made up his mind to be more careful in all future casts, for the prospect of a bullet in his brain was not very alluring.

Three of the gasballs had now been thrown, and as many remained.

Cox lighted another.

Then the door was gently opened.

Slight though the noise was, it must have reached the ears of those below, for several shots were fired, and but for the precautions they had taken, some one above must have been injured.

The detective chuckled.

It looked as though they were about to accomplish their work.

By the time all the balls had been dropped into the cellar, the gas would be overpowering.

True, the outlaws might seek relief by smashing the small windows, but his men outside were ready to clap boards over these, and thus prevent the pure air from passing in.

"Listen!" he said.

The sound of choking coughs came from beyond the

door. That terrible, penetrating gas was getting in its fine work.

Surely it could not take long now before they would be reduced to a state of insensibility.

Then their capture would be easy.

Two more balls remained.

They must go after the others without delay.

He took one up.

He struck the match.

The oil blazed up.

When it had burned a minute or so, and reached the proper point, Cox put his foot down and crushed the blaze.

Then the smouldering process began.

"Open!"

The man who had charge of the door gave it a swing backward.

He believed the action would be greeted by a volley from below, as the desperate men realized that another step was to be taken in their case, and which would bring them nearer the end.

It was not their intention to die like rats in a trap without some sort of effort at escape.

Cox swung the smouldering fireball back and launched it into space.

It was his intention, of course, to drop it down to the bottom of the stairs, where it would accomplish its work.

Something occurred to prevent this.

The smoking ball left his hand all right, but ere it had gone three feet it met an obstruction.

This was nothing more nor less than the face of a man.

He stood on the stairs near the top.

When the ball struck him he gave a cry and dashed it aside with his hand.

"Look out!" cried Cox.

His ready mind seized upon the situation in a minute, and he realized what was about to happen.

Indeed, he even made a reach for the door, but it had unfortunately been thrown back so far that he was unable to grasp it.

But for this fact he might have slammed it shut, and still kept the outlaws below.

The crash came.

They burst upon him like a thunderbolt, the whole five rushing in a body from the terrible atmosphere of the cellar.

Life depended on it.

Silas Cox, by his movement in trying to close the door, placed himself directly in their way.

It was like getting in the path of a stampeding mule train where the animals, mad with terror, would trample any one to death.

The detective was knocked down in a trice, and the five desperadoes rushed over him with the fury of a young cyclone.

As a consequence, the outlaws rushed over and past them.

The darkness was intense.

It prevented them from seeing anything, and all had to be done by guesswork.

Silas Cox had been knocked down and received quite a bruise on his head from a boot coming in rough contact with it.

This stunned him for just about five seconds, and during that time the escaping men had made mighty good time out of the house.

They knew where they were going—a light outside gave them some idea where the door was.

One man missed it, but seeing a window he made a leap and passed through it bodily, the crash of splintered glass sounding appalling on the night air.

"Look out, men, there they come," shouted the detective, scrambling to his feet.

It was the best he could do.

In the first round he had been defeated, but that did not mean everything.

His cry would put the men outside on the alert, and by good luck they might succeed in winging some of the escaping desperadoes.

"After them!"

He followed the first cry with this second one, meant for those near him.

They had been in a measure paralyzed by the sudden rush of the outlaws.

The loud words of their leader recalled their scattered senses, and brought them to time.

Away they went, helter-skelter.

At that very moment there arose outside a tremendous din.

Men shouted.

Pistols rang out.

It seemed as though bedlam had broken loose.

Silas Cox held his breath in suspense as he rushed from the house.

A lantern hung from the branch of a tree was the only means of illumination, but it answered all purposes very well.

The action had been sharp and decisive.

Shot answered shot.

It was all over when the detective and his men dashed out of the house.

"How many, Sam?" he shouted.

"Three down, sir!"

"Good!"

"You mean bad, sir."

"Eh?"

"It means three of our men down."

"And none of these rascals?"

"I'm afraid not. One fell but got up again and ran off. I let him have it again, and he dropped a second time, but I think he got away."

"We've been left. What's that noise?"

"Some of the men tried to follow them."

"Useless in the dark. Get more lanterns."

The landlord, pleased to find that his inn had come through the fracas without being set on fire, hunted up several lanterns, which were lighted.

Then a search was made.

CHAPTER IX.

THE RIVER CHASE.

This movement on the part of the train robbers was so sudden and unexpected that those who hunted them so keenly were not prepared to meet it.

In the spot where the detective had seen the outlaw drop the second time they found blood.

No one was in sight, however.

A trail of blood spots led from the place, and along this they went.

Presently they came to the other footprints, showing that the man had joined his comrades, who were assisting him along.

Hoping to overtake them, now that they were delayed by a wounded man, Cox and his human bloodhounds hurried along the trail.

It was a novel situation.

The three lanterns flashed among the trees like giant fireflies.

Darkness surrounded them as with a pall.

They knew the enemy was in front, and they endeavored, as best they could, to overtake them.

Every man carried his revolver ready for instant execution.

These were not schoolboys or unarmed men whom they chased, but desperadoes, who had killed many on their way, and who were ready to sell their lives dearly.

"They head for the river," exclaimed one of the men, suddenly.

"Are there boats here?"

"Yes, a number."

"I can guess their object."

The detectives scanned the arch overhead.

If the clouds remained they would have a dark night, and the chances of the fugitives escaping might be considered fair.

The river was close by.

It was easy to comprehend why Jesse James and his men had decided to take the water.

In the first place, it leaves no trail.

Then again, having a wounded man in their charge, there was no easier way of taking care of him than with a boat.

Sure enough, the trail led them direct to the water's edge, and here they found where a boat had been tied up.

It was gone.

"Look! I can see the flash of an oar!"

"Yes. Now it is gone. Fire in that direction."

Half-a-dozen shots rang out.

From down the little river a derisive laugh came floating to tell them how futile had been their efforts to wing the enemy.

"Can we get a boat?" demanded Cox.

"Plenty just below."

"Then lead us to them, man."

The party who had spoken was only too willing to do this.

They found that he had spoken the truth, for quite a number of boats were secured to a dock.

A man ran out of a house.

"Here, let them boats be alone, you fellers," he called.

Cox had given his men quick orders to untie three of the craft.

"We are a sheriff's posse, chasing Jesse James and his gang. You will be paid for any damage done. Now where are the oars?"

"You can't have 'em."

"Where are the oars?"

The same words exactly, but what a difference they made, accompanied by the ominous holding up of a deadly-looking revolver.

"In that box yonder."

"It's locked?"

"Yes."

"The key, man. Do you want me to shoot you?"

Out came the key.

Oars were tumbled into the boats, and five men clambered into each craft.

Each gang had a lantern.

"Away we go!"

"Bring back the boats, gentlemen. They're all I've got to live on," called the boatkeeper.

The rapid current of the river swept them along, and the new pursuit had begun.

How it would end no one could say; but Cox and his men were at least hot for the blood of those they chased.

The lanterns were set in the bow.

Four men pulled the boat.

The fifth crouched behind the lantern, which was placed so that it would not blind him.

Thus they went abreast down stream, just far enough apart to cover the space.

As the river was narrow, the strip of light, as a general thing, reached from shore to shore, although there were places where coves indented the banks, and here they lost the edge of the water in the inky gloom.

It was next to impossible for the fugitives to give them the slip.

The very hotness of the chase would evidently keep them on the jump and prevent a landing.

As the river wound this way and that on its course, they kept along in a line; but a mile had been passed over without discovering those they so eagerly sought.

Once Cox thought he detected the fugitive boat.

"Faster!" he said, keeping his eyes glued upon the moving object.

They swooped down upon it, only to discover that it was not a canoe, but a log that was sweeping down stream.

Disappointed, and yet not disheartened, they continued their onward progress.

Another mile was passed over.

"I see it!" cried one lookout.

Sure enough, another moving object was seen ahead, and the flash of oars caught their eyes.

"Pull, men, pull!"

They gained.

Those who were in a position to see kept saying encouraging words to those whose backs were turned in the direction they were going.

"We're getting there!"

"Another pull, my hearties."

"They're in the last ditch."

"Pull, boys, pull!"

They did pull, and with a will.

It was very evident that they were overtaking their quarry.

A new phase of the case appeared.

The wounded man in the stern of the boat ahead opened fire.

He must have been armed with all the revolvers of the

crowd, to judge from the way in which he poured the shot in.

From one boat to another he directed his fire, indiscriminately.

Sometimes the bullets sang overhead in the queerest way imaginable.

Again they splashed in the water.

Now and then a dull thud told that a bullet had struck a boat, or, worse still, the body of a man.

Groans arose, although these were heroically suppressed, as a general rule.

"Fire on 'em!" roared Cox.

The three men in the bows of the pursuing boats at once opened on the one object ahead.

Although their fire was concentrated on that one point, it did not seem to be nearly as effective as that which the wounded outlaw sent back at them.

"Our boat's filling," shouted one man.

"Stuff a handkerchief in the hole," called Cox.

The second boat had run on a snag and stuck. Her oarsmen were frantically endeavoring to pull the craft over, at imminent risk of spilling themselves into the river.

As for Cox's own boat, one of the men had been placed *hors de combat* by a bullet, and, as this made things uneven, the craft yawed from side to side.

In spite of the many bullets sent after Jesse James and his men, no perceptible damage had been wrought.

If any of them had been wounded, they heroically stuck to their posts.

Now the boat was on the other leg.

The foremost boat was drawing ahead, and at a rate that promised to soon take it beyond the range of the lanterns.

Cox was desperate.

He had emptied his revolver without making any appreciable effect on the outlaws.

Something else must be done.

Turning, he climbed into the seat of the wounded man, who lay in the bottom of the boat.

Then he grasped the useless oar.

When his power was brought into play, he managed to send the boat on as before.

Again they gained.

The other two boats had fallen behind, one being still stranded on a snag.

It lay with Cox and his four men whether they could do anything, and a very short time would tell the story in this case.

CHAPTER X.

STANNARD GRANGE.

The man in the leading boat must have reloaded his weapons, at least to a certain extent, during the brief interim, for he was ready to do business again.

Once more the bullets began to skip along the surface of the water.

One struck the oar Cox worked.

Another plowed a ridge across the side of his head, burning like fire.

Whoever the marksman might be, he certainly knew how to handle his firearms to a decided advantage.

Although Cox and his men gained, it was very slowly, and only one thing appeared to give the detective encouragement.

This was the fact that presently the man's firearms would be empty.

By that time they would be close upon the pursued boat, and would be able to turn aside so that volley after volley might be poured into the midst of the outlaws.

It was their only chance.

Even this scheme was doomed to a speedy end, for a bullet cut a hole in the boat that let the water in rapidly.

Cox was compelled to drop his oar and hunt for the leak in order to stop it.

Then he discovered that one of his oarsmen had let go his oar, and was hugging his leg with many a groan.

The same bullet that had splintered the bow of the boat had wounded him, plowing down the calf of his leg in a ragged manner.

This ended it.

There was no use in continuing the pursuit in such a crippled condition.

Cox knew his case.

He gave the order to cease pulling, and the boat at once fell behind.

A shout from the gang they had been so steadily pursuing told them that such a move pleased some people at least.

It is an ill wind that blows nobody good.

The hole in the boat was soon filled in a temporary manner, and that in the man's leg bound up as best they could under the circumstances.

By this time one of the other boats was seen to be advancing.

It proved to be the one which had also been punctured by a bullet.

The third one was still fast on the snag, no doubt, where last seen.

As the immediate pursuit of the outlaws had been given up, they were at liberty to return and rescue their shipwrecked comrades.

Between the two the snagged boat was brought off in safety.

They were in rather a dilapidated condition, and surveyed each other ruefully.

"This is a rum go," remarked Cox, as he put his hand to his head and rubbed the bruise made by the passing bullet.

"Shall we give it up, boss?"

"Not much; but we'll take it a little more quietly until we find out where they land."

Those who were wounded were soon taken care of as well as the circumstances would allow, and expressed themselves as ready to do whatever the detective ordered.

Once more they moved down the river abreast, those on the two sides keeping a close watch on the shore to make sure that they did not pass the fugitive boat.

Twice they sighted small craft drawn up, and on each occasion an inspection proved that they were not the ones they sought, for neither had been in the water for hours at least.

At any rate they had the satisfaction of knowing that their work was well done as they went along.

Those they pursued were still bound down the stream,

Although what their destination was could only be guessed at.

"What have we ahead of us?" asked the detective when the stream narrowing brought the three boats close together.

"There's a village near by, and on this side some outlying houses and grounds," replied the man in the nearest boat whose position was in the bow.

"Good. I'm sure they'll leave the river soon.* Keep your eyes open, and report anything that looks suspicious."

"All right, captain."

The current was swift just here, and the three boats made remarkably good time as they swept along in their passage.

Had any one been on the shore they must have witnessed a queer sight.

One not familiar with the circumstances might believe it was a race by lantern light, with all the competitors even.

To avoid accident a sharp lookout had to be kept, but the one occasion when a boat was snagged proved to be the only accident.

A light appeared ahead.

It must mean that they were approaching the village spoken of.

The river widened.

At the same time the current grew less violent, and gave them a better chance to investigate the shores as they went along.

Here they halted to examine a boat that came under their observation. A little farther down the stream they found a landing that looked so inviting that they must needs inspect it to make sure.

More lights gleamed near by.

The village was just beyond.

Here they would have a serious business, for every boat had to be examined until they found the one for which they looked.

Cox chanced to be on the other side.

Glancing across, he saw a lantern swinging in a circle after the manner of a freight brakeman's signal.

Silas Cox knew what it meant.

The boat had been found—at least the man who had thus signaled had run across something of such importance that he desired his chief's opinion of the matter.

Eagerly Cox directed his man to row across the little stream.

They found both boats in among the bushes at a small private dock.

"Here's a boat with wet oars in it. The rope at the bow is also wet."

Cox examined all.

"Looks like we have struck it," he declared.

"Here's proof."

The man who uttered these words was a pupil of Cox—a young fellow with something of a record already for daring and shrewdness.

As he spoke he pointed down at the boat.

In two places there were jagged holes above the water line, undoubtedly made by bullets.

Further still, in the bottom of the boat, were a number of empty brass shells, and the water in the place was tinged with blood.

All doubt was now removed.

Jesse James and his men had landed here.

How long ago had that been?

Cox figured.

He finally made up his mind it could not have been less than half an hour, perhaps more.

They must follow, of course.

Landing, they secured the boats.

The smallest dock seemed to belong to some private house, which was secreted among the trees that formed a nearby clump.

Cox went ahead.

With his lantern he examined the dock, and found marks that convinced him that the wounded man's cut still bled freely.

Oh, for a dog to follow the trail.

In the absence of one, they must make a virtue of necessity, and do the best they could.

Cox tried to follow it

This he was successful in just so far as the planks of the dock went.

Once the trail left there he could no longer see the little blood marks, and this ended the matter.

"Put out the lights," he said quietly.

Since the lanterns could do no good in showing them the trail, it was better that they should have no lights to betray their movements to the watchful eyes near by.

Obedying the orders of their chief, the men put the lanterns out.

Cox then marshaled his forces.

Besides himself fourteen men were present.

Two of these had been wounded so seriously that they were hardly fit for active service.

This brought his force down to thirteen in all.

The wounded were left at the dock to guard the boats, for there could be no telling what sly trick these fellows would be playing.

He cautioned them to be vigilant, and keep a good watch upon the boats.

If any one appeared and refused to answer their challenge they had orders to shoot.

Thus, leaving the rear well covered, Cox was ready to make his advance.

He had a theory of his own.

Undoubtedly Jesse James and his comrades must have had an object in landing at that particular dock of all on the river.

Had they simply desired to get ashore it was reasonable to assume that they would have chosen a larger public dock in the village at which to draw up.

They had no light that he knew of with them.

Consequently this little dock, sequestered among the bushes, could not have caught their attention.

Plainly some one among the desperadoes knew of its position beforehand.

Thus Silas Cox figured it out.

He was a good hand at this.

If, then, the small dock was known to the men they were chasing, it became evident that they must know the people of the house.

This was a natural conclusion.

With such an idea in view he started with a posse to see what the house was like.

There was no trouble in finding it.

Among the trees it loomed up.

Not a light could be seen.

The window blinds were closed, and to all appearances the dwelling was deserted.

Cox was struck with the appearance of these things, and could not but remark them.

Again he noticed that there was a neglected air about the grounds, so far as he could see in the darkness.

Was the place deserted?

One of his men might know.

He had them around him, and it was quite easy to find out what he wished.

In low tones he put the question.

A man answered:

"I think this is the old Stannard place, sir."

"Anything odd about it?"

"Well, yes. A man was killed here years ago—by his own son. You see the young fellow was mad in love with his father's ward. He was away in Europe at the time, and was coming to marry her. They do say he thought the world and all of the girl."

"Poor fool; but proceed."

"When he arrived home, filled with pleasure at the prospect of a happy marriage, he found her already the wife of his father.

"Hot-tempered, he quarreled with his father. The old man must have goaded him to fury, for finally the boy struck him with a heavy paper-weight, and crushed his skull in."

"The deuce!"

"Just then, of course, the girl rushed in and saw the awful issue."

"Served her right."

"He showed her the result of her treachery and upbraided her. Then he ran from the house, nor was he ever seen here again."

"Quite a dismal story. Who lives here now?"

"I think the girl. She has grown old in these few years, and looks at least fifty. Here, with a servant, she leads a lonely existence. People say the old grange is haunted; that at midnight, in the dark of the moon, can be heard the struggle in the library, and the heavy fall when the old man goes down under the blow of the paper-weight; groans accompany the scene, and the survivor upbraids his false sweetheart. Then all is still again."

Cox shrugged his shoulders.

"A delightful place, truly. But its terrors must not daunt us."

CHAPTER XI.

"YOU COME TOO LATE."

This doleful account of the tragedy which once marked the house before them did not cause the detective any uneasiness.

Ghosts he never had believed in, and it was too late for him to begin now.

If Jesse James and his men had the *entree* of this house, it must open the doors to them.

How were they to know?

He applied himself to this task.

First of all he made the circuit of the house, finding a

path that, though moss-grown and full of weeds, led him around.

At one window he paused.

The heavy blinds were closed, but the keen eye of the detective caught a gleam of light.

This gave him encouragement.

He crept up close to the house in the endeavor to catch something that was said, or at least to hear the sound of voices.

It was impossible to see, for the shutters prevented any such possibility.

He did catch the murmur of voices, and one at least seemed to be that of a man.

This encouraged him.

Surely the men he sought must be here.

He walked on.

A door next called for notice.

Could he open it?

Supplied with such tools as burglars use for the purpose of effecting an entrance into houses, the detective soon had the door unlocked.

Then he discovered a disappointing fact.

It was either chained or barred on the other side, and he could not open it.

He went on.

Another door served him in just the same way, and he began to see that an entrance to the grange was bound to be a difficult thing for him to master.

As he never let such a thing get the best of him, he did not despair.

Once this had been a farmhouse of rather pretentious size.

There was a cellar underneath—could he find a window in this?

Although the house was so tightly closed, there was apt to be some weak point about it, and his search was for this.

Cox had made a study of human nature, and he knew the failings of man.

In ten minutes he was successful.

A small cellar window was unable to resist the force he brought to bear upon it, and with a creak it swung open.

The interior was dark as Egypt.

Cox cautiously lowered himself, and finding support on a barrel reached the ground floor in safety, chuckling over his success.

He could not grope around.

It was more dangerous than lighting a match to get his surroundings, for in the gloom he was apt to knock something over and betray his presence to the inmates of the house, who would appear upon the scene, the ghost to the contrary, ready to give him a warm welcome.

Having thus made up his mind, he ignited a match and glanced around him.

There were a number of things in the cellar, principally old musty vinegar barrels, perhaps some containing wine.

What he was looking for principally was the stairs leading above, as his object was to reach the upper part of the grange as soon as possible.

At first he failed to discover them, but turning, walked

ound an arch, and the object of his solicitude was before him.

He reached the foot of them ere his match had fully pired.

Of course the door above was locked, but did it not give a chain like the others?

He investigated.

To his satisfaction he found that it did not.

The door was not even locked.

Here was a remarkable touch of good fortune, which Silas Cox eagerly seized upon.

He found himself in the upper part of the house, and with not the faintest idea as to his immediate surroundings.

Which way should he go so as to reach the light—this question puzzled him.

Again a match.

It might be dangerous, but no more so than stumbling round in the darkness.

What a boon a little light can be at times!

The detective made good use of his opportunity, for must be exceedingly brief.

He was satisfied with what he had done, and moved forward with an assurance that had come from the one chance around.

Darkness again.

It was well.

He bent to a door, shook his head, passed on, tried another, and finally reached the end of the house where he remembered the light had been.

Here success found him.

He discovered a small line of light leading from a doorway.

When he glued his eye to this aperture the result was most very brilliant—indeed, he could see absolutely nothing.

Next he applied his ear.

This was better.

The voices within reached him—one was that of a woman, the other a man.

In vain Cox endeavored to catch other sounds—he became convinced that there was but one man in the apartment.

This set him to thinking.

Probably they had left their wounded behind, being unable to keep him.

The wretched woman of the grange, endeavoring in solitude to make up for her sin of the past, might deem an act of mercy to nurse the wounded man, and again, the chances were Jesse James knew her.

Thus it was exceedingly easy to figure out the whole business.

Silas Cox was satisfied.

At any rate they could capture the wounded outlaw—they knew not whether it was one of the James boys or not.

Should he go for his men?

He shrugged his shoulders.

One man, and wounded at that, was not enough to capture him.

True, the fellow had proved himself a remarkably good shot with a revolver, but Cox did not mean to give him a chance.

He touched the doorknob.

Gently turning it he was pleased to find that he could open the door.

Inch by inch he pushed it back.

Once it gave a slight squeak, which he feared must alarm those in the room; but his imagination was greater than their suspicions.

Now he had the door partly open—the aperture was wide enough to allow him a chance to slip through, and without hesitation he availed himself of it.

He found himself in a dimly lighted room—the illumination was softened by the shade that covered the lamp.

It seemed to be a small library.

Cases of books filled three walls.

One glance the detective cast around him, and then his gaze became fixed upon the moving, living figures in the scene.

Directly across from the door by means of which he had entered, a woman knelt upon the floor beside a sofa.

Upon this latter article of furniture a man was stretched.

The voices had ceased.

Only a woman's sobbing could be heard.

Silas Cox was puzzled.

Could it be possible that the wounded outlaw was anything to this woman who had lived a lonely life here for years?

She looked the picture of desolation and woe.

Dressed in sober black, her hair hanging about her face, she seemed like a nun, or a witch from the other world.

Having heard her story, the detective knew just what to think.

He stepped nearer.

Fearing treachery, he held his revolver in plain view as he advanced.

She heeded him not.

Wrapped in her grief, she cared nothing for the world around.

He put out a hand and touched her on the shoulder.

With a start she threw her head around—a pair of midnight eyes looked up to him from a mass of loose hair.

He felt a cold chill pass over him.

It was as though a spectre from the grave had suddenly appeared before him.

"Who are you—what do you want?" she asked, in a hollow voice.

"I am a detective, madam."

"Well?"

"I have come to arrest this man," pointing to the silent figure.

She smiled wearily.

"You come too late, sir."

"Too late?"

"Look for yourself."

He was startled by her words, but immediately bent over the silent form on the bed.

As soon as his eyes fell on the face, he knew just what she meant.

The man was dead.

There could be no mistake about it.

Even to one hardened by experience the presence of death is always terrible.

So Silas Cox felt a shudder run through him.

"When did he die?" he asked.

"A few minutes ago—see, his hands are not yet cold," she replied.

"I do not see any wound."

"Wound?"

"Yes; he was sorely hurt."

"In his heart and mind—yes."

"Bodily, I mean. We saw his blood in the boat, and tracked him here."

"Can it be possible? When did this occur?"

"To-night—within the hour."

"Surely there is some mistake."

"How can it be?"

"Robert has been in this room, rarely leaving it, a whole month."

It was now the turn of the detective to be surprised, and he hardly knew what to say.

She was not deceiving him—of that he felt positive; and yet if this dead man were the train robber left behind by Jesse James, how could he have been here so long?"

There was a question in the very look he turned upon her when changing his glance from the white, wan face of the dead man to her own countenance, from which she had brushed back the long masses of wild black hair.

"For whom do you take him?" she asked quickly.

"For a companion of Jesse James, whom we hunted on the river, and who landed at your dock. Tell me, is this not so—he is dead and can not be harmed by what you say."

She shook her head.

"You are entirely wrong. This man is Robert Stannard, the son of the man who owned this place—my husband."

"Ah, yes, I have heard. Years ago——"

"Years ago he had a terrible quarrel with his father, and in the heat of passion killed him with a heavy paper-weight."

"I was the guilty cause of it all. For years I have endeavored to atone for my sin."

"A month ago Robert appeared here, and said that he was doomed to a speedy death."

"It was his wish to die in the room where his awful crime had been committed, because he believed that his father's spirit would be there and forgive him."

"I kept his secret because they would have dragged him away to jail."

"The end came peacefully a few minutes ago, and his last words bring me comfort, for they tell me he has already been reconciled to his father, and that all is forgiven between us."

"I thought, of course, that you had come here to arrest him for that long-ago crime, and that was why I told you he had gone beyond the reach of the law."

"I have nothing to say about it, madam. Let me leave you alone with your grief. You must pardon the intrusion."

"Do not mention it, sir, but kindly go."

"I will, after I have asked a question, madam."

CHAPTER XII.

TRACKED TO POTTER'S CASTLE.

She looked at him uneasily, as though some sudden feeling of alarm had flashed through her mind.

What could he want to know?

He was an officer of justice; this poor man had been a fugitive from the law before death took him beyond the reach of its stern arm; she had harbored Robert Stannard for a month or more in her house, and had thus become amenable to the law he had outraged.

Perhaps some fear came upon her.

He could see a spasm pass over her face.

"What is the nature of that question? I must know the nature of it before I can answer."

"It does not concern anything you care about. I simply wished to know whether you had heard any sound when these men passed by?"

"Was it—let me see—an hour ago?"

"I should judge so."

"Then I can say that I believe I heard some one out well—the bucket creaks when pulled up. My girl was with me at the time, so I am sure it must have been an outsider. They sometimes enter the grounds to get drink, for we have the best water for miles around. On brave souls dare this, for, you know, foolish people have declared this house to be haunted."

"Thanks. You have answered me. I will now leave you with your dead, and, believe me, I have a very exalted opinion of your womanly kindness in thus caring for a poor devil whom fate must have treated very shabbily."

"I was the unhappy cause of it all, and the least I could do was to care for Robert during his dying hour. I did more—I let him believe that I was guilty at the time, when, in truth, it was all his father's doings. He swore to me that Robert had married abroad; showed me a letter, that seemed to be in his hand, telling of his wedding, and bidding his father heal my wounded heart. You see, in spite, I married the old man in order to revenge upon Robert. It was all a terrible mistake, and Francis Stannard ruined three lives by his sin."

The detective could not but admire the lady; he saw she was above the average of her sex.

What she had suffered was beyond the power of words to describe.

He would like to have seen more of her; but two reasons prevented. In the first place, she desired to be alone with her grief, and he was gentleman enough to realize it.

Then, again, he had other fish to fry—the outlay might be utilizing every minute of this time to effect their escape, and to linger longer would be foolish.

Hence he said a quiet good-night, and made a bow that would have done credit to a Chesterfield, and backed out of the room.

She had never thought to ask him how he had gained access to the house.

He meant to leave in the same manner, and after passing down into the cellar, used matches until he had found the window through which he had effected his entrance.

Thus he beat a hasty retreat from the manse.

He wondered how much time had been lost in carrying out all this business.

Not near so much as would have been had he attempted to bring his men in.

The first thing he did upon reaching the window was give a signal, and, low though it was, his listening men heard.

They were around him almost immediately, curious, of course, to know what he had been doing, where he had been, and how the prospect stood for making a wholesale capture.

He hated to do it, but the men had to be let down, and hence he rapidly sketched the brief adventures that had fallen him since he passed through the cellar window. They were interested in the story, although, of course, disappointed in not finding those they sought under this roof.

Where could the outlaws be?

The detective was for finding out.

He immediately opened a court of inquiry.

"Who was it told me about this house?"

"Me, captain."

"Ah! Sackett, are you acquainted here?"

"I spent a number of years in the place."

"Did Jesse James come here?"

"Several times."

"Then he has friends in the town?"

"Yes."

"That's bad. I'm afraid we've lost our grip."

"Perhaps not, captain."

"Why do you say that?"

"I know where they live."

"Can you take us to them?"

"Easily."

"That's one point gained. Still, it's bad."

"How so?"

"I'm afraid they'll give us the slip. An hour's time is a good deal. Much can be done in sixty minutes, you know."

"Shall we go now?"

"Without delay."

"Where shall I take you first?"

"To the house where Jesse James' best friend lives. It is to be presumed that in time of trouble he would seek out the party for whom he had the best feelings."

"Good. That would be Brose Potter—they were old chums during the war. Brose has settled down, and is a respectable tradesman to-day, but he will never be anything but a friend to Jesse James."

"On to the Potter mansion, then."

"Follow me."

Sackett led off.

The grounds of the haunted manse were left behind, and presently the squad of men walked along the dusty street of the little Missouri town.

Silas Cox was convinced that their last hope was at hand.

He believed that should these men escape this time they would get beyond his reach, and he might as well row up the sponge.

The village seemed wrapped in slumber.

They made no noise as they walked along, for the road was unpaved.

A few wide-awake roosters crowed around the neighborhood, and a dog or two barked as they wandered round their inclosures.

These were the only sounds.

Not a human being was in sight.

The man who had said he was well acquainted in the neighborhood led them straight on.

He evidently knew where he was going.

This fact encouraged Cox.

Perhaps the hard luck that had followed their pursuit thus far was about to be broken.

He hoped so.

It was about time something occurred to bring the notorious train robbers of Missouri to the bar of justice—they had run things to suit themselves long enough, and the laws they had outraged must soon crush them.

Perhaps he was the chosen party destined to execute these same laws.

Silas Cox shook his head at the thought.

The poor success that had met his efforts thus far was not encouraging.

It did not look as though he were marked as the successful man—rather that an unfriendly fate had doomed him to defeat, judging from the long line of disasters that had marked his trail from the first hour they had ran across the outlaw and his gang.

He kept up a brave heart.

Nature had made Silas Cox one of those men whom nothing could discourage.

After receiving a terrible knock-down blow in the arena of strategy he would come up as smiling as ever and continue to labor on.

Such a man must often succeed, where others fail, by the sheer force of his character; not that he did not know when he was whipped, but it took a good deal to bring about that point.

They had to pass directly through the village in order to reach the house where Sackett believed his men might be found.

A few street lamps shone.

These were what they had seen from the river when descending that stream.

One place only had a light in it, and this was a saloon, used also as a tavern—each village and town always boasts of such a place, where the weary traveler can be entertained after a fashion.

They were now through the place.

The houses became more isolated.

Silas Cox had strode along at the side of Sackett, without a word up to this time.

Now he spoke in a low tone.

"Are we near the place?"

"Yes. It is just around a bend in the road a hundred yards ahead."

"Good. What sort of a place is it?"

"A small one—the house is peculiar in its build—Potter was always an odd genius, and fashioned his dwelling after the style of a hundred years ago. It is called the Castle by the village folks."

"Does it look like one?"

"Very much. He has what he calls the moat around it, a bridge to lower, and a sort of gate that Potter names the portcullis."

"Good heavens! And in Missouri, too. I wonder the people don't put him in an asylum."

"They laugh at him. But Potter don't care a rap for

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thinking. He goes about his business percent."

That's sensible of him. When you come to it every man in this country has a right to do as he pleases and humor his whims as long as they don't infringe on some other person's right. We'll soon see whether his castle can keep us out."

"It would be a great place in which those men could hold us at bay."

"But would Potter allow it—his reputation would suffer, and perhaps he has a family."

"He has a wife and some young ones, but I imagine they are in sympathy with his views of things in general, for Potter is a character to influence those who daily come in personal contact with him."

"You excite my curiosity. I imagine we may have quite a time here."

"I wouldn't be surprised, captain."

Silence now fell upon them.

They were passing around the bend in the road, and must presently come upon the house of which they had been talking.

The men walked two and two abreast, and kept time after the manner of veterans.

One of them limped a little, showing that he had been wounded while in the boat, but his enthusiasm and desire to be in at the death caused him to ignore the hurt.

Perhaps the spirit of revenge had something to do with the matter, for it enters into the composition of nearly every human being, more or less, and crops out on occasion.

All of the men were feeling particularly bitter against the outlaws; but this was because they had been baffled in their schemes.

When one is defeated in any pet idea, it is perhaps natural to feel hard toward the author of the discomfiture.

"Here is the house."

Sackett whispered these words in the ear of the detective.

Already Cox had seen this for himself.

The castle stood out boldly, despite the blackness of the night.

It was painted white.

The detective stood and surveyed it with more than passing curiosity.

It was a sight to make a passer-by stare unless he knew of it beforehand.

In England one might not have thought it so strange, but to run across a castle in America, and in the sovereign State of Missouri, was odd, to say the least.

Of course it was small in point of size, but, with turrets, and tower, and everything complete, made a picture never to be forgotten.

No wonder the men stopped and gasped.

They were amazed, having had no warning as to the surprise in store for them.

Silas Cox wasted little time.

He snapped his fingers three times.

This signal was understood.

It meant that they were expected to surround the house, and, like phantom guards, they set about doing their duty.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SKELETON AT THE FEAST.

It was a queer freak that induced a man to build a peculiar house.

There could be nothing in its surroundings to justify such a thing. He had no fear of dangerous enemies as inspired the owners of English castles in the few days of yore.

Probably Potter was an earnest student of the stuff that dwelt upon these olden customs, and nothing would do him but that he must live, in a measure, as they did in the days of chivalry, when bold knights fought in lists for the favor of fair ladies.

It must have been a double life he led, for when he crossed the drawbridge he again entered the nineteenth century, and weighed out turnips, sold butter and marmalades, and carried on the usual business of a country storekeeper.

Silas Cox was a little puzzled.

If Jesse James and his men were in this building, it would be a hard job to dislodge them; a cannon would be necessary to beat down the wall, and they had none.

Perhaps dynamite might do as well.

First of all he saw his men in position.

They swung around the castle.

To complete the circuit, one had to encamp on the bridge over the stream that conducted the water away from the moat.

The number of his men was rather significant—thirteen, counting himself; but it happened that he did not have a grain of superstitious sand in his composition, and hence he was not uneasy on this score.

He climbed up to take a better view of the premises, and by some skillful acrobatic work managed to astride the portcullis.

This brought him on a level with the second-story windows.

Indeed, if he had a board five or six feet long, he could make a rude bridge that would take him over to the nearest window.

This caused him to remember that he had stumbled upon such a thing nearby.

He gave a chirp that brought the nearest man down underneath him, and in a whisper communicated what he wanted.

The man had some difficulty in finding the board, when a few minutes had elapsed he succeeded in doing so and brought it over.

Cox placed it in position.

It presented a novel means of reaching the house, if he could not find a way of entering through the window, that must be his own fault.

When Potter erected his castle, he never dreamed it would be assailed by such a man as Silas Cox, or that it was so vulnerable.

Across the plank the detective crept.

He thought of "La Somnambula," and the scene with the sleep-walker crosses such a narrow bridge.

Now the window was within his reach.

He put up his hand and tried it.

Finding it fast, he used a glazier's diamond and broke the piece out. Through the hole he inserted his arm, grasping

the fastening, almost lost his balance once, and finally found what he sought.

Gently he opened the window, and crawled through. No one met him half-way with hostile demeanor.

Never, perhaps, was a castle entered with as much ease as this one. In olden days they used to use battering rams, and effect their object amid the greatest clatter and confusion of life.

Silas Cox might have given those ancient worthies a lesson or two worth having on the subject of accomplishing anything with a result.

He used cunning instead of force, and the latter can never compare with it in power.

Having made a success of his first move, he meant to keep it up.

What of the interior of the castle?

Did the freak of a proprietor include spring guns in that category of ancient tools? If so, the unlucky detective, wandering around these passages, might find himself a victim of such an invention.

He hoped no such death-dealing traps lay around prospectuously.

Although willing to take all the ordinary risks that his hazardous profession called for, Cox did not want to sacrifice himself on the altar of a fanatic—a worshiper of ancient habits and customs.

He preferred to live, and meet new difficulties as they came along.

As the lay of the interior was entirely unfamiliar to him, he could not know which way to turn, and was contemplating an advance in a certain direction, when a light suddenly flashed in front of him.

The object his hand had grasped to steady himself, and which projected from the wall, turned out to be a lever working the electric lights with which Potter's style was supplied.

Cox saw what he had done aghast.

What if the lights had, in obedience to his magic touch unintentional touch, sprung up all over the house?

In consternation he endeavored to turn the power off again, but not understanding the way in which the lever worked it took him almost a full minute to do so.

Here was an unexpected matter.

Would it betray him?

He left the spot and hurried along the route which the light had shown him.

At every step he fully expected to run across some one hurrying to see what accident had befallen the electric plant.

There was a peculiar feeling that came over him when he considered the possibility of some diabolical trap being sprung upon him—it made the darkness more intense.

He came to some stairs.

Down these he would have plunged headlong, only at some friendly sense of intuition bade him slacken his pace, and just in time to discover what lay ahead of him. As yet no one had collided with him.

He walked more slowly, with arms outstretched, and groping for any obstacle.

Thus he came bang up against a figure, and at once grasped his arms around it, with an instinct born of long service in the field.

To his amazement, it was icy cold to the touch, nor was there any motion to the figure.

It was as though he had clasped a dead man.

What was the truth flashed into his mind?

He released his desperate clutch and put up his hand, to discover that the fugitive had a metal helmet; in fact it was a full outfit belonging to a knight of the days of Richard the Third.

What more appropriate than that such an affair should be found in the castle?

Cox smiled now when he remembered the awful chill that pervaded his frame when his arms had first come in contact with the cold steel of the armored knight.

"I wonder if there's any more of these gentry that I may butt my head against!" he muttered.

Was that a chuckle?

Surely the grim old knight who had once worn this suit of mail must haunt it in spirit, and was laughing at him now.

Of one thing he was glad.

His stupid blunder in turning on the electric lights did not seem to bear any fruit.

As yet he had seen no evidence that the inmates of the house were aroused.

He was in a lower hall—at least it seemed to him to be such a place, for when he groped around he discovered that it was wide in its area.

By and by he stumbled up against the same old knight again, or at least a suit of armor that felt very like it.

This time, coming on one side of it, he made a different discovery—the suit of mail was only a shell to protect the front of a man; any one could step up and into it, thrusting his arms through those of the mailed figure, and in a moment arming himself *cap-a-pie*.

This fact received particular attention at his hands, because of what followed.

With a sudden flash that almost took his breath away, the electric lights illuminated the scene.

Silas Cox stood aghast.

The place which he had taken for a hall was in reality a large room.

Around the walls hung trophies of the chase, ancient weapons of all kinds, and such things as would carry one's mind back several hundred years at least.

Nor was this all.

What occupied the center of the room called for even more earnest attention.

A dining-table of heavy material was laden with all manner of edibles, and might truly be said to groan under the weight.

It was a dining-hall, then, fitted up after the manner of the oldtime ones.

Cox might have been slightly interested at some other time.

Just now he had too much at stake to bother with such things as curiosity.

He fancied he heard voices.

Surely some persons must be coming to partake of this feast.

He was an uninvited guest.

They would not care to have him at the table, and even a discovery of his presence might be a very disagreeable feature.

What should he do?

What could he do?

The detective's hand was on the suit of mail, and what might be likened to an inspiration came to him just then.

He flitted around to the rear of the figure, and tried the fit.

The suit of armor must have been made for a man of just his size, for it filled the bill, and he filled it to a dot.

Here was a ridiculous situation!

Surely no one had ever fallen into such before.

He seemed put back four hundred years, and looking through the bars of the helmet—for the vizor was raised—almost expected to see a troop of knights and ladies of the days long since gone by come trooping in.

The voices grew louder.

Then they were not of his imagination or spirit voices, but a reality.

Who was coming to the feast?

The detective waited.

He could give a very good guess, but preferred to wait and see with his own eyes.

Moving figures attracted his attention.

They were entering the dining-hall through a door at the extreme end.

The voices appeared to be those of men only, and Silas Cox looked in vain for the presence of women, but this was nothing singular, since Potter was an old bachelor, and a woman hater.

All of his work was done by persons of his own sex, and yet in a business way he was quite a favorite among women—being careful to let his real feelings hide behind a mask.

Potter came first.

He was a quaint figure.

When at home he usually assumed some old style manner of dress that was in keeping with his surroundings, and thus presented rather an odd appearance.

Who were with him?

Cox held his breath while he looked.

One, two, three, four—that was just the number of the men they were pursuing.

Surely these could not be the ones, and yet—the detective had high hopes.

The companions of the old bachelor antiquarian were dressed something like himself in the habiliments of long ago, and their best friends might have experienced a difficulty in recognizing them.

It is no trouble to get any such garments in the present day—costumers have them, and they are used upon the stage of tragedy.

The four men seemed amused at their peculiar position, although it showed itself by an occasional grin when Potter's attention chanced to turn in another direction.

They stood back of the chairs, where he placed them until he gave the signal, which was a wave of the hand—then each man took his seat.

Cox was satisfied.

He had recognized Potter's companions as Jesse James and his men.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MAN ON THE STAIRS.

There could be no doubt upon this score, for he only saw their faces, but could hear all that was said. Potter was not quite a fool.

He drew the line somewhere, and it came to the spot of the olden days—he made no attempt to carry it which was fortunate indeed.

They attacked the viands on the table.

A manservant, also dressed in the same old-fashioned livery of the time of the crusades, waited on them, plying this and that, as called for.

It was a generous spread, even if gotten up in a hurry. One thing astonished Cox.

If these men had been in the castle all the while, came it that he had not seen lights? Were most of the windows so arranged that they would not show illumination?

It was a fact that he never fully solved, but in time to come he would find much to wonder at in the mysteries of Potter's Castle.

Fancy the detective's position!

Here was his game.

Within ten feet of him sat Jesse James, his brother Frank, and two other train robbers who were also wanted badly for offences against the laws of the sovereign State of Missouri.

He dared not reach out his hand and endeavor to arrest them.

Why?

In the first place he was virtually alone, and these desperate men would make crow's meat of him long before his followers could force an entrance into the castle.

He had a force near at hand, quite sufficient to arrest them, if he could only avail himself of it.

How could this be done?

He paid little attention to their talk, so busily engaged was he in endeavoring to solve this question.

It was impossible to leave the suit of armor and go out of the room.

The electric lights were too bright.

Perhaps when the wine came on they might get a little confused, not be able to see straight—then his chance would come.

His position was uncomfortable.

He really hoped they would not be too long.

What bond of friendship could there be between Jesse James and the antiquarian?

Hark! the latter was speaking of it.

It seemed that the outlaw had done Potter some favor during the war—saved his life, the latter declared, and he now showed his gratitude by serving them.

They feasted royally.

As a grocer, Potter kept a stock in his house that could be drawn on in an emergency, and the four hunted men had certainly sat down to nothing of the kind for many a long day.

Then came wine.

Silas Cox was not enjoying his position a bit, since he found it hard to keep so erect while occupying the suit of mail.

Hence he was delighted to see the wine come, since it warned him the end was near.

He had ere this been compelled to slip his arms out from their casing, and yet he remained behind the figure. Now the thought occurred to him that perhaps he could creep to the floor and creep to the stairs.

Three of the men had their backs toward him, and the others could not well see the floor—their attention was taken up by other things at any rate, and they preferred to gaze upward.

He determined to try.

If failure came he would have to make a bolt for it, that was all.

When he had made up his mind to do a thing, the detective was not the man to stop over trifles, and in this case, seeing his way clear, he immediately entered upon his scheme.

Lowering himself to his hands and knees, he began to back away.

So long as he could keep the man in armor between himself and those who sat at the table, all was well.

The trouble began when this was no longer possible, and then each second was fraught with the most intense anxiety.

Would he make it?

The stairs down which he had come were near at hand, and in another minute he could reach the foot.

His troubles only began there, in reality.

The light was strong.

He could only creep up the stairs one step at a time, and would have to watch the men with a careful eye, in order that he might not move and attract attention should one of them happen to glance in that direction.

Ah! his foot touched the heavy post at the foot of the stairway.

Watching his chance, he concealed himself behind this, and then rested.

It was his desire to take a good observation before proceeding further.

Turning his head, he looked up the stairs.

The balustrade was heavy, and this in a measure would screen him.

He could hear the five men growing merry over their wine, and when his eyes were turned in that direction, he was compelled to smile to see them bending over the table to clink their glasses together, while the owner of the castle gave the toast:

"Here's success to you, boys, in your warfare against Yankee capital, and confusion to your enemies. May you live long, and when your time comes die with your boots on."

To this they drank uproariously.

Their life was one of danger and excitement, and had few compensations save the fear men entertained toward them.

Some men live upon applause—these reckless train robbers did upon the alarm their presence caused in the hearts of all honest men.

Now was the opportunity of Silas Cox.

He hastened to improve it.

While all of the men were looking ceilingward, as they allowed the rich fluid to trickle down their throats, he began creeping up the stairs.

It was easy enough to do, so long as the men were not looking.

They soon put down their glasses, and Silas Cox found himself half-way up the stairs.

Another run like that would take him to the very top.

Would some one else propose a toast?

He sincerely trusted so.

His wishes were doomed to disappointment, for the men fell to talking again, and he dared not move for fear lest the keen eyes turned toward him should discover his presence.

This was growing monotonous.

He grew a little impatient, and even made up his mind to take chances that were quite beyond his usual line of tactics.

In doing so he put his foot in it, and brought down the house.

A cry from the table was his first warning.

Cox stopped still and crouched low.

"What is it, Frank?"

"Potter, you said your only servant besides the cook was waiting on us?"

"Yes."

"Then who was the man I saw creeping up the stairs just now?"

"What?"

"Just what I said—a man was creeping up the stairs just now. He is crouching there now. I could hit him from here through the railing."

"Can it be possible? I give you permission to fire, Frank, my boy. Any servant of mine who tries eaves-dropping knows the penalty."

"And I object."

With the words Silas Cox sprang up the remaining few steps, and vanished above.

Not without hearing a bullet whistle past his ears as Frank James pulled the trigger.

His sudden and energetic movement had been the means of saving his life, for the train robber would certainly have brought him to grief had he been given a decent shot at him.

The greatest confusion existed below.

"After him!"

"A spy, boys!" gasped Potter, aghast more at the thought that his castle was not so impregnable as he had believed it, than because his friends' lives were in danger.

The five men left the table.

Several, in their haste, failing to push back their chairs properly, tumbled over.

This added to the racket.

It did not retard the pursuit, however, for they scrambled to their feet like fun, and rushed pell-mell after their comrades.

Cox had time enough to reach the window, providing he could find it.

He would not find a chance to carefully cross over the plank, but must run his chances of falling in the moat.

These things flashed through his mind even as he reached the top of the stairs and prepared to run along the hall.

The darkness settled it in his mind.

He turned back.

Better hold his enemies in check for the present, until his men could arrive, after receiving his signal, or else

time be given him to grope his way along and find the window.

This was the thought that came to him.

In times of extreme peril the mind moves with a rapidity only equaled by the flash of electricity from the heavens or over the wire.

Cox had only taken three steps when he made this resolution to return.

Instantly his progress ceased.

He turned back.

The five men had left the table and were rushing in a fever-heat of excitement for the stairs.

There was no need to tell the James boys or their comrades who this man was.

It was sufficient for them to understand that he was a spy.

That meant their enemy.

They were hot to lay hold on him, and learn what his presence meant.

Of course danger was in the air—they could sniff that—but in what shape.

Eager, however, to seize upon the unknown, and make him confess, they rushed forward toward the flight of stairs.

At the bottom Jesse James saw the flight before him—more than this, he caught a glimpse of a man standing above and aiming downward.

Though a bold man, Jesse James was no fool.

He knew what discretion meant.

There could be no telling how many foes were up there.

If one could find an entrance, why not more?

"Look out!" he shouted, dodging back.

At the very instant there came a flash above and a sharp, reverberating report.

The leaden messenger touched the left ear of the outlaw in its passage, and had it been two inches more to the right, his career would have been ended then and there.

As it was, the close shave gave him to understand that the marksman above meant business, and a rush of their forces would result in the death of at least one of them.

This would probably be himself.

Officers generally picked him out when firing individually—he was used to it.

Several things like this caused him to be very particular—he rather guessed he would not attempt to storm those steps.

As he called to his companions to look out, he dodged back himself.

The five men found places of shelter—two crouched beside the stairway, another knelt behind the table, a fourth made use of a niche nearby, while Frank James got

behind the armor which had so recently concealed the detective.

Jesse James and Potter were together.

Thus they could consult.

In about a minute or so the outlaw learned that there was another means of reaching the second floor, and the idea at once flashed into his head to make the detour.

Potter led the way.

They could leave the dining-hall without exposing themselves to the fire of the man who held the fort at the top of the stairs.

CHAPTER XV.

SILAS COX GIVES UP THE GAME.

The owner of the castle led Jesse James along a hall until they came to the rear of the house—instead of a stairway such as might have been expected for the servants, they came upon a ladder running aloft.

It was no time for commenting on the singular condition of affairs.

The outlaw was only too anxious to carry out the scheme in hand.

Potter went up first.

In a minute they found themselves on the second floor of the building.

The darkness was confusing to the outlaw, but with Potter it must be different, since he knew every foot of the ground.

"This way," he whispered

"Hold on!"

"What's wrong?"

"It's dark as Egypt. Let me have hold of you."

Potter put out his arm and the other clutched it.

"That's better—go on now."

They began to creep forward.

Not knowing but what they might come upon the enemy at any moment, Jesse James kept his revolver ready for instant use.

That weapon had sounded the death-knell of many a brave man.

It would do more wicked work before the hand that aimed it was laid low in death.

Thus they crept along, meaning to surprise the man who held the stairs.

As luck would have it, they themselves were the ones surprised.

The outlaw felt the other start suddenly

Close to his ear Potter's lips said:

"Look here!"

Although the Missouri outlaw could not see in which direction his companion pointed, he seemed to guess it from intuition.

Looking keenly, he could make out a window.

It was intensely black within, and lighter outside, so that one could see the proportion of the frame to the contrast.

Stars glimmered in the sky.

Even as he looked, the dark figure of a man was outlined against that sky.

He crawled in at the window.

Not a sound was heard.

It seemed like a pantomime.

Jesse James stood and gasped.

Hardly had this man reached the floor of the hall than another figure was in sight.

Then came a third and a fourth.

By this time Jesse James realized that the castle was in the hands of the enemy.

He lost all faith in its impregnable qualities.

To escape the threatened doom meant flight, for nothing else would do it.

He thought of his comrades.

They would surely be gobbled up, unless warned in time of the danger.

He bent his head to the ear of the man who owned the castle, and who appeared to be almost petrified with astonishment at what he saw.

"Come back," he whispered.

The tug he gave at the other's arm probably did more than anything else to convince him that they must beat a hasty retreat.

As they came, they went.

Down the ladder, and along the lighted dining-hall.

No doubt all this time the men were dropping in through the window above.

They could imagine it anyhow.

Jesse James gave a signal the others knew, and presently all were with him.

He kept nothing back.

They were entitled to know all.

"We can make a stand here, and keep them from coming down the stairs," said Frank.

"There's no need of that."

"What do you say, Potter?"

"The house is doubtless surrounded."

"Yes."

"You want to leave?"

"Well, the worst kind."

"I'll show you a way out, if you never breathe a word of it to a living soul."

All readily assented.

"You see this castle of mine wouldn't be complete without an underground passage."

"That's a fact."

"And I mean to show it to you."

"Where does it come out?"

"In Tom Garron's livery stable in town. Tom is in my employ. I really run his place."

Jesse James chuckled.

"Potter, you may be minus four horses when morning comes."

"Just what I was about to suggest."

"They'll come back to you, or double their worth in dollars—make sure of it. Now show us the hole. We may be pressed for time."

"No hurry. They ain't ready for business yet; but come on; we will go."

"How about Nick?"

"He's in a secret room beyond the panel. They couldn't find him if they hunted the house for a week."

"You'll look after him?"

"Depend on it, till his wound is healed."

"Potter, you're a trump."

"I'm just paying off that debt."

They were soon at the entrance to the underground passage.

This was a trap.

The room had a stone floor, and one of the slabs Potter lifted up, disclosing a dark hole.

A ladder was in sight.

"Here's a lantern and plenty of matches. Go down, and good-by to you."

Frank James lighted the lantern and descended the ladder, in which he was followed by two others.

His brother waited to shake hands again.

"Potter, are you sure you won't get into trouble for this night's work?"

"Don't fear for me. They can't prove anything, you see. I'll laugh at 'em. Go down, and let me cover up the tracks. All is well."

The last of the train robbers started to descend the short ladder, his companions waiting below.

Presently the stone fell into place.

All signs of recent moving were smoothed away.

Then Potter made his way back to the dining-hall, and seated himself at the table.

At his order the manservant brought clean plates, and the table looked ready for more company.

Then he waited.

Five minutes passed.

Footsteps were heard.

A number of men entered the room from the passage, showing that they must have found the rear ladder used in descending.

At the same moment others came down the stairs in a group.

Potter waved his hand.

"Seats, gentlemen; I have been waiting for you quite a time."

Cox was a little surprised at the coolness and audacity of the man.

"Where are those with whom you were dining a short time ago!" he demanded.

"My guests have deserted me, I am glad to say. A man doesn't fancy feeding a lot of rascals at the point of the revolver."

Cox saw his game.

He knew he would be powerless to prove anything against this man.

Perhaps he could be browbeaten.

He tried that game.

It failed to work.

Potter was cool and affable, but swore he did not know how Jesse James and his men entered the castle nor the manner of their departure.

"People are taking strange liberties with my house," he said, pointedly; "I must see to it that its defenses are strengthened."

"That hasn't anything to do with the case. Where are those men?"

"I don't know?"

"You mean you refuse to tell?"

"You can construe it as you please, and of course I am in no position to dispute you."

Potter was a man who could not be browbeaten, that was evident; and the detective did not care to waste further time with him.

"We will search the house."

"Do so."

It was evident from the man's cool manner that he had no uneasiness regarding those who were being hunted.

From this fact Silas Cox knew that one of two things was the case—either Jesse James and his friends had left the house, or else were securely hidden away.

His men obeyed his orders.

In a few minutes the castle was ablaze with electric lights, for Cox made the proprietor turn them on in every place.

The officers made a thorough search.

From cellar to attic they looked.

Not a man of those for whom they looked could they cover.

It was useless.

Had he dared Silas Cox would have been glad to have burned the building down, believing that in this way he would unearth the fox; but, of course, he had no authority for doing this.

Finally he left the castle with his men.

Without Potter's knowledge, he left one man behind as a spy, the fellow hiding back of the armor.

If Potter went to the hiding-place of the men after they left, this worthy would know it.

Half way down the street into the town they met a man running wildly.

"Stop!" called out the detective.

"Who are you?" gasped the fellow.

"Officers of the law searching for Jesse James."

"Heaven be praised. I'm the owner of the livery stable—they've just been there and taken my best horses—I'm a ruined man!" the other cried.

"Where were you going?"

"To tell Mr. Potter—he is my partner in the business though every one don't know it."

"I see. It would be useless going to him, since I believe he sent those men to get the horses. How long have they been gone?"

"Only a few minutes. Listen! you can hear them now."

The night breeze did bring the clatter of hoofs to their ears.

Cox knew that all was lost.

"How many horses have you?" he asked.

"Four."

"Are they good ones?"

"Only scrubs."

"Then that settles it. Jesse James is safe for all of us. Thrice have I had him at bay, and yet he escapes. That satisfies me. I am not the one destined by fate to run him down. I give up his trail here and now. You all hear what I say. I am done."

Although Silas Cox did give up the trail at this point, there were other detectives ready to take it up. Next week's JESSE JAMES STORIES (No. 20) will contain another story dealing with the further pursuit of the James Boys, and entitled: "Jesse James in Disguise; or, The Missouri Outlaw as a Showman."

THE END.

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